



# The Osterhout Free Library



THE OSTERHOUT FREE LIBRARY: A HISTORY

## Osterhout Free Library Head Librarians

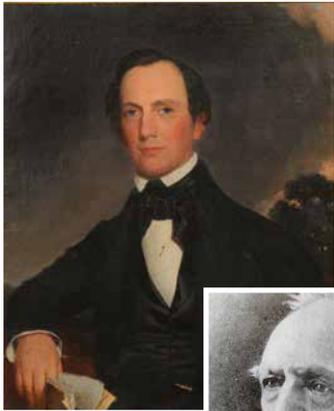
1887-1903	Hannah Packard James	
1903-1930	Myra Poland	
1931-1940	Mary Neikirk Baker	
1940-1957	Grace W. Estes	
1957-1972	Elizabeth Hesser	
1973-1997	Joan M. Costello	
1997-2007	Diane T. Suffren	
2008-2011	Sara D. Hansen	
2011-	Richard C. Miller	

## Highlights of Our History

- 1889** The Osterhout Free Library opened on January 29 at 10am.
- 1893** Borrowing privileges extended to all Wyoming Valley residents who work in Wilkes-Barre.
- 1903** Patrons are permitted to reserve books and renew checked-out items.
- 1904** Children's room opens, one of the first of its kind in the United States.
- 1906** Borrowing privileges extended to all Luzerne County residents.
- 1908** A three-story stack wing is added to side of building.
- 1923** North Branch opens.
- 1924** South Branch opens.
- 1926** Branches open at Georgetown and Midvale settlement houses.
- 1937** Library receives first public money for operation.
- 1938** Library acquires a "Book Truck," donated in honor of 50th anniversary.
- 1945** Free borrowing is restricted to Wilkes-Barre residents. Others must pay \$2 year.
- 1954** First floor meeting room added to rear of building.
- 1962** Library begins service as District Library Center for Luzerne and part of Wyoming Counties.
- 1966** Construction is completed on 2nd floor addition at rear of building.
- 1968** Plains Branch opens.
- 1972** Library flooded in Hurricane Agnes, losing 70,000 books plus other materials.
- 1982** Ken L. Pollock Children's Wing is constructed on side of building.
- 1984** Joins with nine other libraries to form the Luzerne County Library System.
- 1999** Interior is extensively renovated; county-wide catalog and automated system installed.
- 2009** Renovations completed on building exterior.
- 2014** Library celebrates 125th Anniversary.

*Speaking of the Osterhout Library,  
Melvil Dewey said it is to be Wilkes-Barre's  
university—a place where any person may be  
instructed in any study.*

# Isaac Smith Osterhout OCTOBER 26, 1806-APRIL 12, 1882



The ancestors of Isaac S. Osterhout arrived in America before the Revolutionary War, eventually settling in the area that would become Wyoming County, PA. The family came from the town of Oosterhout in Holland. Although they eventually dropped one O from the spelling of their name, the family continued to pronounce it as rhyming with “rooster.”

On October 26, 1806, Isaac was born in Lagrange, about six miles below Tunkhannock, where his father was involved in merchandise and lumbering. When he was twelve years old, Isaac began to study at the Kingston Academy, boarding with a local family.

In September 1823, at the age of 17, Isaac arrived in Wilkes-Barre to take a position as a sales clerk in a small store on River Street. Whether he crossed the Susquehanna by ferry, or by the very first Market Street Bridge,

which was completed in 1818, he would have arrived in Wilkes-Barre only a short distance from the corner of Northampton and Franklin Streets, the plot of land where his mother was born, the same corner where he too would make his home later in life, and where, only a short distance away, the library bearing his name would one day stand.

His aptitude for business was quickly apparent, and after a year he accepted a job offer in Elmira. He returned to Kingston in 1830, and worked at a store there for several months. Toward the end of December, he moved into a boarding house in Wilkes-Barre and began a mercantile partnership with his cousin, Whitney Smith, operating from a rented corner property on Public Square, comprising 30 feet on Main Street and 50 feet on Public Square. In 1834, the partnership was dissolved, and Isaac remained in business by himself. In 1837, he was in a position to purchase property fronting 100 feet on the northwest side of Public Square, on which stood a house and two storefronts at the time. He moved his business to one of these storefronts, where it continued to operate until a fire ravaged that side of the Square in May, 1859. After the fire, he did not resume in business, but rather turned his attention to maintaining and improving the various properties he had purchased around town.

A prominent citizen, Isaac was an active member of the Wyoming Historical and Geological Society. In 1850 the Wilkes-Barre Water Company was formed, with Osterhout serving as Secretary/Treasurer until the time of his death. He was also Secretary/Treasurer of the Hollenback Cemetery from

formation in 1854 until the end of his life. In 1870, he was appointed an associate judge of Luzerne County. When the city of Wilkes-Barre was incorporated in 1871, Osterhout was elected one of three auditors in the first municipal election.

The first library in Wilkes-Barre was a private concern called the Wilkes-Barre Library Company which maintained a collection accessible only to subscribers, from 1806 to 1826. Isaac Osterhout and several like-minded young men participated in the founding of the Wyoming Athenaeum in 1838, another subscription library for dues-paying members. This library was housed in his own office, and grew to several thousand volumes, largely through his own effort and careful management. He remained Secretary/Treasurer of this enterprise for well over 30 years.

When he died on April 12, 1882, the terms of Isaac Osterhout’s will provided very comfortably for his wife and made many bequests to relatives and friends, as well as to local organizations including St. Stephen’s Church, the Home for Friendless Children, the Wilkes-Barre City Hospital, and the Hollenback Cemetery. The bulk of his sizeable estate, however, was committed to fund a public library. Though he was known as a businessman rather than a philanthropist, Osterhout’s love of books must have played a large part in this decision. The Osterhouts had no children, and no near relations, as his only sister, Mary Ann, predeceased him, and her daughter, his only niece, died in 1880.

Isaac and Elizabeth Osterhout are buried in Hollenback Cemetery on North River Street in Wilkes-Barre.



Isaac Osterhout met Elizabeth Cloyd Lee of Port Elizabeth, NJ, when she was visiting a friend in Wilkes-Barre. Miss Lee was born on

May 4, 1813, the daughter of a two-term New Jersey congressman. A continued acquaintance between Isaac and Elizabeth resulted in their marriage on January 29, 1840. Samuel DuBois painted individual portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Osterhout in 1844. The paintings were professionally restored in 1974 and are currently displayed on either side of the fireplace in the library’s reading room.

After Isaac’s death, his wife continued to occupy their home on the corner of Northampton and South Franklin Streets. Osterhout may have watched the First Presbyterian Church being built in 1849, not half a block away from this home, and may have passed the building on any day for the rest of his life, when he headed downtown. He could not have known it would one day house the library he envisioned.

Elizabeth Osterhout died on April 28, 1886. The Directors of the Osterhout Free Library noted her passing in their minutes, stating, “Mrs. Osterhout having warmly encouraged her husband the late Judge Osterhout, in his benevolent purpose of appropriating his large estate to the founding of the Osterhout Free Library in this City, her memory together with his deserves to be cherished by the citizens of Wilkes-Barré.”

# Planning the Library



Melvil Dewey

In 1882, the will of the Honorable Isaac S. Osterhout, just deceased, bequeathed property amounting in value to about \$325,000 “for the use and purpose of founding, establishing and

perpetuating in the said city of Wilkes-Barre a free library...to be called **The Osterhout Free Library.**” The money was to be invested for five years before being released for this purpose, and thereafter managed by the board of seven trustees whom he had named in his will. These directors convened their first meeting in 1883. In February 1886

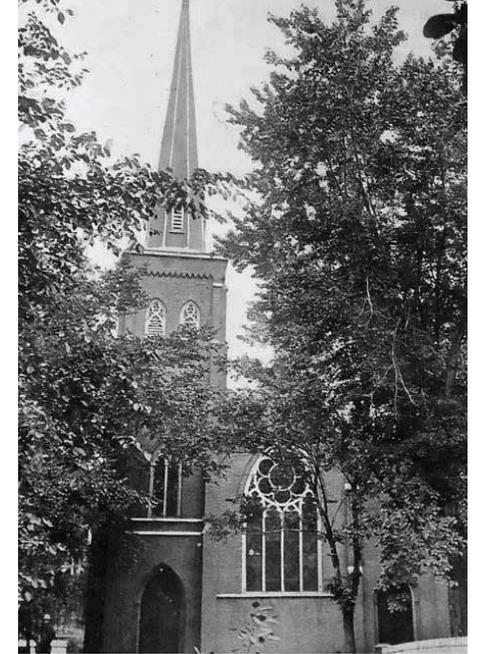
the Library was incorporated: “The said incorporation is formed for the purpose of founding, establishing, and maintaining in the city of Wilkes-Barre a free library.”

The Directors asked Melvil Dewey to serve as consultant in planning the library. Dewey was then in his mid-30s, but was already, and continued to be, an innovative and influential presence in librarianship. He had created a system for organizing library collections, which he first published in 1876. The Dewey Decimal System continues to be used at many libraries throughout the world, including the Osterhout, to this day. When he first visited Wilkes-Barre in November 1886, Dewey was the chief librarian at Columbia University, where he was in the process of starting the first library school in the country.

There being no empty lots on which to build

in the downtown area, the Directors had purchased a church building as a possible home for the library. The transaction was concluded in May of 1886 at a cost of \$27,000. The gothic-style church, built in 1849, was being vacated by the First Presbyterian Church (although they would continue to hold services in the building until February 12, 1888). The congregation, founded in 1772, was constructing a more magnificent structure a short distance down the block.

The Directors particularly sought Dewey’s opinion on whether the building would be suitable for a library, or whether it should be demolished to commence construction of a new building. After a thorough examination of the structure, he urged them to purchase but not demolish it. He reasoned that a fully operational library could be housed in the



church for between five and ten years. During this time public response to the new library could be determined. For similar reasons, he recommended buying books incrementally rather than investing all at once in a large collection.

## Reference Room Inscriptions

The former Sunday School room at the rear of the building was renovated to serve as the Reference Room. The Librarian selected the following literary inscriptions to be carved into the woodwork:

**“While I was musing the fire burned.”**

*Psalms 39:3*

**“What can we reason but from what we know.”**

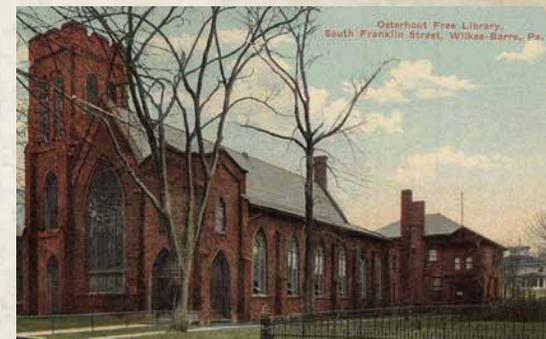
*Pope, Essay on Man*

**“Infinite riches in a little room.”** Marlowe, *Jew of Malta*

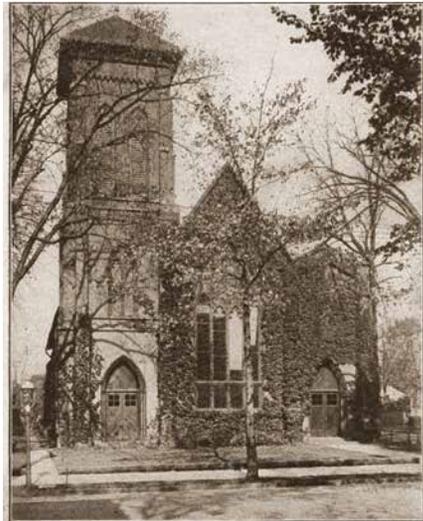
**“And out of old Bookes in good faithe, cometh al this new science that men lere.”** Chaucer, *Assembly of Foules*



The terms of Osterhout’s will specified that the library provide a home for the Wyoming Historical and Geological Society (now called the Luzerne County Historical Society). The Library trustees voted to erect a separate building behind the library to house the collections of the Society, and construction was completed in 1893. This building continues to serve as their museum, though the Society later moved their library and administrative offices to a nearby location.



High on the rear wall of the main room of the library, one can see the coat of arms of the town of Oosterhout, Holland. The Osterhout family coat is very similar, containing a silver shield with 3 black crescents. The burgemeester of the town provided the library with a small copy of the town's coat of arms. The family coat of arms was incorporated into one of the stack wing windows and can now be seen in the southeast corner on the second floor of the children's wing.



Edmund L. Dana

Though Edward P. Darling had acted as president while the terms of Osterhout's will were brought to fruition, Edmund L. Dana became the board president

when the first permanent officers were elected in March 1886. Born in 1817, Dana practiced law in Luzerne and Wyoming Counties. A veteran of the Mexican War, by 1862 he was a colonel in the Civil War, leading the 143rd PA regiment at Gettysburg and in pursuit of the Confederate Army. He was wounded at Antietam, and held as a prisoner of war for 3 months, before resuming his command. At the end of hostilities, he was brevetted out of service with the rank of brigadier-general. He continued to practice law, and was elected to a ten-year term as Judge in Luzerne County. He served as president of the Wyoming Historical and Geological Society, and president of Wilkes-Barre City Council from 1882-1884, and 1885-1886. Dana was instrumental in overseeing the creation of the library, but was too ill to attend the opening in January, and died on April 25, 1889.

# Hannah Packard James 1887-1902

## and the Opening of the Library

Melvil Dewey recommended that Hannah Packard James be hired as Librarian of the new institution. James, born in Scituate, Massachusetts in 1835, had been employed at the library in Newton for 17 years, rising from clerical assistant to head librarian.

The Directors had intended to restrict use of the library materials to the building. It is said that Miss James was adamant that the library freely circulate books to the public. This idea was quite new at the time. The trustees agreed to this, and they also agreed that she could hire her younger friend, Myra Poland, as assistant librarian. Miss Poland had worked at the Arlington, MA, library, and would oversee the cataloging of the Osterhout collection for years to come. Myra Poland and her mother came to Wilkes-Barre with Miss James, and the three of them shared quarters on Northampton Street. In 1897, Miss James and Miss Poland moved to a home in the spacious Kingston neighborhood of Dorranceton.

The two years of preparation between the hiring of Hannah Packard James and the opening of the library engendered something of a local controversy. Two recent female graduates of Dewey's library program, as well as three local women, had been hired to prepare the books for use and compile the catalog. One newspaper editorialized its displeasure with the state of affairs as follows:

“As a means whereby half a dozen pretty and refined women are given nothing to do and



Hannah James

plenty of time to do it in, I think the Osterhout Free Library is a shining success, but as the great public institution which the founder intended it to be, it is a grand and ridiculous failure. The board of old women who have the thing in charge, and who have a fund of half a million dollars at their disposal, are going to start in a moldy old building, and with a library of ten thousand volumes. They have been paying out big salaries to half a dozen imported lady librarians and catalogers for the past six months, and it will be at least eight months more before the library can be opened.”

Miss James and her assistants had prepared a collection of about 10,500 volumes for use when the library opened. When choosing which books to order, James relied heavily on the catalog of the larger collection of the Newton Library where she had previously worked. The Osterhout collection was about 87% non-fiction; James and the board were wary of fiction, choosing to focus only on “the best.” Many books from Isaac Osterhout's personal collection, as well as many from the Athenaeum, could be found on the library shelves. Every volume had been given a paper cover for protection. In addition to the carefully typed cards in the card catalog, the library had a printed catalog, in book form, of all the materials, thoroughly indexed; they produced a supplement in 1895, bringing it up to date with all the titles added in the interim.

On January 28, 1889, the opening ceremony

was held in the new First Presbyterian Church next door. A newspaper account of the event notes that music was provided by Oppenheim's orchestra, Rev. Dr. Tuttle delivered a prayer, and Rev. Henry L. Jones provided remarks, which included the sentiment that Isaac Osterhout's generosity and forethought

provided this library to enrich the city of Wilkes-Barre. Jones then introduced the guest of honor: Professor Melvil Dewey, who at this time had become the State Librarian of New York.

Mr. Dewey's theme was “The Public Library—the People's University.” He noted, among other things, that the modern library is “a living spring” that educates the entire community, and added, “For consultation and reference is the library chiefly intended, but a circulating department will be introduced by way of experiment.” He stated his high opinion of what had been achieved by the dedication of Hannah Packard James and her assistants: “I have been into many hundreds of libraries in the performance of my duties, and without any undue compliment, I would say that none I have yet seen is more convenient or better adapted to the needs of the people.”

Afterward, attendees stepped out into the cold



**In a letter to her Board of Directors in 1890,** Miss James justified the behind-the-scenes preparation necessary before the library could open:

“To the public the time consumed in preparing the Library for use seemed unnecessarily long, the general idea being that books need only to be purchased, and the titles perhaps written down, when they are ready to be given out; whereas every volume has to go through from eight to ten or twelve processes before it can leave the Library... As a book without an index is of little worth, so is a library without a full catalogue of all its treasures.”



only to staff members. To check out a book, users made their selections from the card catalog or the printed catalog. They would write this number on a card and submit it at the delivery window. Library staff would retrieve the item from the shelf and complete the checkout process. Users were initially limited to one book at a time, and most books were loaned for 2 weeks. Readers could also request books to

look at in the reference room.

The cataloging and work rooms were at the southwest corner, separated by partitions from the main library.

The reference library was in a separate room at the rear of the building, entered via a short passageway. This room was the jewel of the new building. A rich carpet decorated with chrysanthemums covered the floor. Oak pillars rose to the ceiling, and matching woodwork encircled the room. On the rear wall was a large fireplace with a heavy plate glass screen. This allowed for the delight of viewing a roaring fire without the attendant dangers to the public or the materials. Chairs of solid oak surrounded small tables, each lit by an incandescent lamp. This room was to be a quiet place where users could consult the library's extensive collection of reference books. And here, in the southeast corner of the room, Miss James made her office behind heavy curtains.

At 10 o'clock the following morning — January 29, 1889 — the library officially opened. Readers were registered and books were checked out. Library membership was initially limited to Wilkes-Barre residents over the age of 12. In 1896, borrowing privileges

were extended to all residents of Wyoming Valley. In 1903, patrons were able to place holds on checked-out items. Within a few years of opening, nearly 50,000 volumes were being circulated each year.

Miss James was truly a pioneer in the field of librarianship, and was prominently known across the United States. Other libraries were using Miss James' choice of books for the Osterhout as guides to their own purchases. She worked to get books and library services to the places in the community that needed them most. She published the monthly Library News-letter from 1891-1902. This was mailed to subscriber's homes and contained book lists, reviews, and other original articles; it also contained paid advertisements.

Among her many interests and accomplishments were positions she held in the Free Kindergarten Association, the United Charities, and the Society of the Colonial Dames (she claimed direct descent from John Alden on her mother's side). An elected councilor of the American Library Association, she also served on the committee that led to the creation of the Pennsylvania Library Association in 1891. She lectured at the School of Library Service at Columbia University, the first professional academic program for librarians. In 1897 she attended the International Conference of Librarians in London, England.

Hannah Packard James left her position due to illness in November 1902, although she continued to select books and advise the library. She died in April, 1903.

## "Speaking of the Osterhout

**Library,** [Melvil Dewey] said it is to be Wilkes-Barre's university—a place where any person may be instructed in any study. This is a university not bounded by insurmountable limits. It reaches beyond the college or high school. About everything important gets into print, everything worthy of preservation on all subjects. And if each subject finds itself recorded in a public library, easy of access and so arranged that a person may extract from the folded leaves the subject upon which he wishes to be enlightened, then truly [you] have a university. Our school education furnishes the tools with which to work; the library is the field in which these tools are to be used."

From the Wilkes-Barre Record article "The Free Library: Formally Opened to the People of This City," January 29, 1889



January night, walked up the street where the electric lights of the library, installed in 1888, glowed invitingly in the darkness, and were welcomed into the library.

The main entrance was at the north corner. A sign at the vestibule displayed a significant warning in large capitals Dogs Not Allowed Inside. Upon entering, one saw a large corridor stretching to the back of the great room, and one noticed immediately the card catalogs and bronze screens which separated the library into functional sections. At the front of the building was the magazine room, overlooked by the glorious rose window. In order to provide more light in the building, the tall stained glass windows on either side of the building had been replaced with clear glass.

In the magazine section, users were limited to one issue at a time. The library subscribed to 76 titles, including all the prominent American journals as well as many European publications. Items were read at oak tables, each containing a light fixture with porcelain shade. Racks for coats, hats, and umbrellas were situated nearby.

The library's main collection of books was housed on 26 massive upright cases of polished oak which were separated by screens in the center of the main room, accessible

# Myra Poland 1903-1930



Myra Poland

Myra Poland, who had assisted Miss James from the very start of organizing the library, succeeded her mentor as library director.

One of her first major accomplishments

was achieving Miss James' goal of having a Children's Room at the library. A space designated specifically for children was a relatively new concept, and it was said to be one of the first spaces of its kind in any library in the country. Hannah James had written: "The benefits of a children's room in a city like ours cannot be over-estimated... To teach the children to love good pure literature is one of the grandest works that can be engaged in."

The magazines were relocated to shelves along the main corridor, and the front of the building was repurposed as the children's area. It opened on March 17, 1904. Miss Helen Betterly was in charge of services to the young, and would continue in that position until she retired in 1941. Each year, on the anniversary of the opening, a vase of flowers was placed on her desk.

The library collection was continually growing, and shelf space was running out. In 1901, the library had 30,300 books in its collection, triple the number since when it had opened.

In 1908, construction was completed on

a three-story fireproof stack wing, added to the south side of the building. This addition provided shelves capable of holding nearly 50,000 books. The architecture was carefully matched to the existing structure. The addition included beautiful windows, each bearing a different design which had been carefully selected by the Librarian. One of the most distinctive features of the entire library, and one which continues to enthrall library users of all ages, is the presence of clouded glass floors on the second and third stories of the stack wing. The ground floor features a mosaic floor made of small tiles imported from Italy.

When this addition was completed, the shelves and library stacks were open to the public. Users no longer had to request books, but could browse and make selections themselves.

In 1913, the Library began to open on Sunday afternoons, a benefit for those unable to come during the week. (These Sunday hours ended in 1926, though they would occasionally be resumed in the future.) In 1914 the Library purchased a Victrola and records. On Sunday afternoons from 5-6pm, the public were invited to listen to music in the library's Reference Room.

The 21st Annual Report noted: "With improvement in trade generally, there are fewer unemployed and less leisure time. A decrease in circulation may be

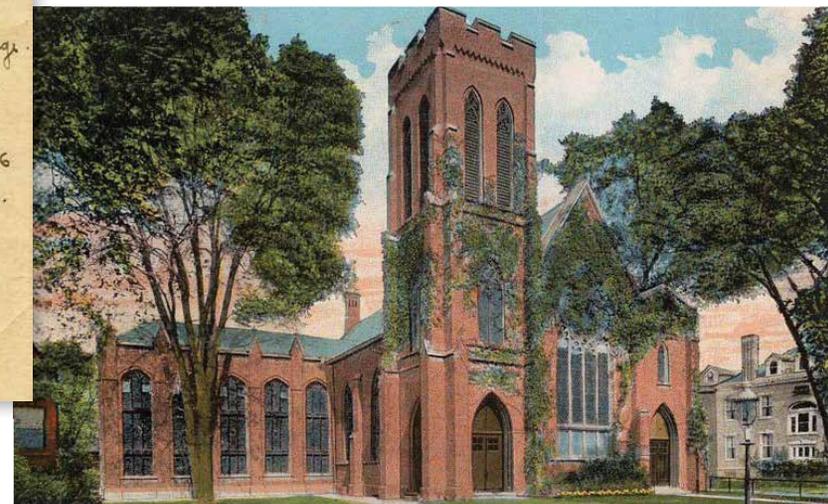
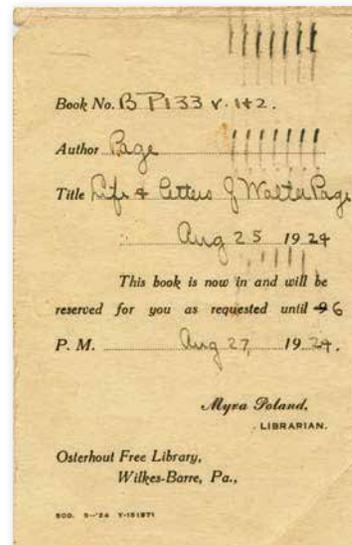
attributed also to the innumerable nickel theatres and moving-picture entertainment." At one point, a measles epidemic occasioned the closing of the Children's Room to prevent the spread of the disease. By the Library's 25th Anniversary, in 1914, the collection had grown to 45,000, with an annual circulation of 140,000. The number of borrowers was 17,360. Books were distributed to factories through the YWCA, and small libraries were maintained at the Heights Settlement and the West Side Settlement.

Between 1919 -1924, the Osterhout Library Lecture Foundation sponsored a highly popular series of public lectures. The library engaged many eminent speakers; renting a public hall and charging the public a very small fee to attend.

In 1926, the library opened branches in Georgetown and Midvale.

In 1930, Myra Poland had worked at the Osterhout Free Library for 43 years, and had been its director for the past 27 years. While visiting Boston, Miss Poland underwent an operation in Massachusetts General Hospital and died 2 weeks afterward.

Myra Poland died October 28, 1930 and is buried in Arlington, Massachusetts.



Osterhout Free Library 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

# North Branch

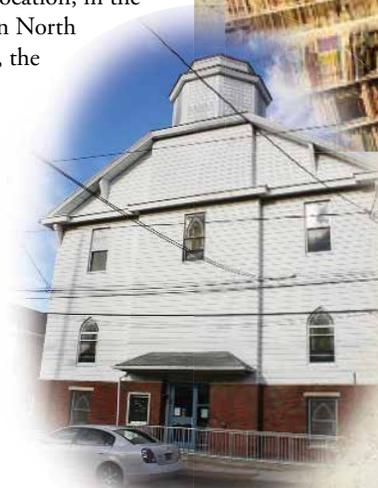
In the early 1920's, the Board of Directors decided that extensions of the library were needed to serve people some distance from the main library. After much planning, the North Branch was opened in a former saloon at 676 North Main Street in 1923. Miss Julia Stockett was the first supervisor. The collection began with about 1400 volumes. The room was crowded from the first day, and the branch had 650 registered users in a very short time, mostly children from the eight grade schools in the surrounding area. Plans were made, almost immediately, to look for a larger space. The branch moved to George Avenue in 1935, occupying several locations

on that street until 2007, when a fire in the building left it without utilities. It continued to operate from an interim location, in the Northeast Micro building on North Washington Street. In 2009, the library found a permanent home in a former church — like its parent library — at 28 Oliver Street. The collection has grown to over 15,000 items, and the branch continues to serve as a community resource for residents at the north end of town.

# South Branch

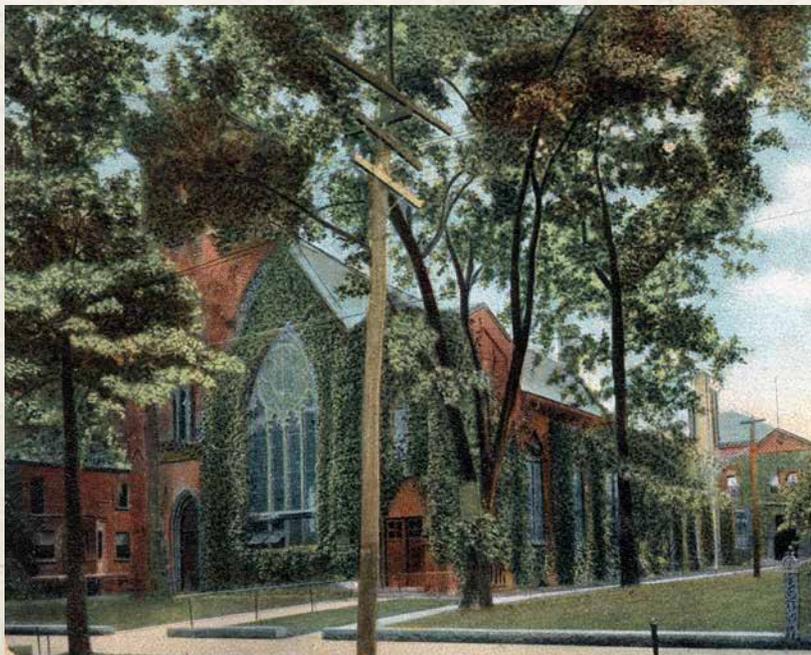
In 1924, the South Branch opened in a storefront at the corner of Stanton and Airy streets to serve residents of South Wilkes-Barre, and remains in the same location to this day. As it is located near Dodson Elementary School, a systematic registration was held for several days in advance of

opening. Schoolchildren visited by grades at a certain time, submitting applications which they had filled out beforehand. The library opened on February 5, and 646 borrowers checked out 1534 books that day—460 adult and 1074 juvenile titles. In 2010 the branch received a full interior renovation.



Osterhout Free Library 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary





**Myra Poland described the designs she chose to be incorporated in the windows in the stack wing:**

- The Coat of Arms of Queen Elizabeth, as the patron of literature.
- The seals of Oxford and Cambridge Universities.
- Shakespeare's coat of arms.
- The seals of the Bodleian Library & the British Museum.
- The coat of arms of the Osterhout Family.
- The book-plates of John Wilkes & Isaac Barre.
- The coat of arms of the family of Benjamin Franklin.
- The seals of Harvard & William and Mary Colleges.
- The book-plate of William Penn, including his coat of arms.
- The seals of Yale & Princeton.
- The book-plate of Isaiah Thomas, an early Massachusetts printer.
- The mark of Caxton, the earliest English printer.
- The mark of Wynkyn de Worde, Caxton's pupil.
- The mark of Aldines, early Italian printers.
- The Gutenberg medal.
- The mark of Fust & Schoeffer.
- A papyrus plant, which was used in the earliest form of paper.
- A group of Roman scrolls.
- An Egyptian tablet.
- The arms of Jacques Auguste de Thou, a famous book collector.
- The marks of French printers Jean DuPre & Jean Petit.
- The broke-vase binding design of Geoffrey Tory.
- The arms of Jean Grolier, "the king of French bibliophiles."
- The Elzevir sphere, early Dutch printers.
- Coats of arms of crowned heads famous for their book collections: Francis I, Catherine de Medici, Cardinal Mazarin, Maximillian I of Germany, Philip II of Spain.



# Mary Neikirk Baker 1931-1940



Mary Neikirk Baker

Miss Baker came to Wilkes-Barre from a position at New York City's public library at 42nd St. and Fifth Avenue.

A few months after beginning at the Osterhout, Miss Baker attended the annual convention

of the New York State Librarians in Lake Placid. There she met Melvil Dewey, now 80 years old (he would die later that year). Learning that she was the new librarian at the Osterhout, he reminisced to her about his experiences here in the 1880s. He recalled well that purchasing the church building had been a point of contention at the time. He told Miss Baker that he confidently told the library board, "By all means buy that beautiful old church—and save your money for an endowment."

The handsome chandeliers which continue to light the library were installed as part of a rewiring project in 1934, replacing fixtures that had previously been on the columns.

The library was affected by the flooding in March of 1936, but damage was limited to the basement. The library was closed for 5 days in order to renovate. Many borrowed books had been damaged in flooded homes; luckily they could, in most cases, be dried out, cleaned, and returned to the shelves.

Use of the library had increased dramatically during the Great Depression, but by the mid-1930's a nationwide trend showed less

library usage, probably tied to increased employment. In 1935, the library began to maintain files of newspaper clippings, indexed to preserve items of local interest.

After vacationing in England in 1937, Miss Baker remarked on England's system of libraries, centered in each county with branches in each village. She stated that though Pennsylvania was the second richest state in the nation, there are more people here without access to free books than in any other state.

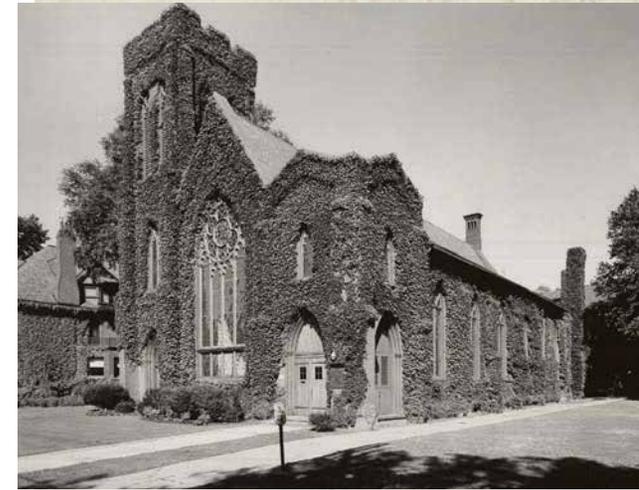
It was in this year—1937—that the Osterhout first began receiving public money. Until that point, the income from its endowment had allowed the library to self-sufficiently fund its operation. But operating costs had slowly begun to exceed income. The Library appealed to the Wilkes-Barre City Council for a \$10,000 appropriation in the city budget. The cost of maintaining the North and South branches was nearly \$7000, and the remaining funds would be used for the purchase of books and magazines. They noted that the American Library Association determined that effective library service required 1 dollar per capita, whereas the Osterhout was now operating at 55 cents per capita. Also, most cities in Pennsylvania of comparable size were already allocating significantly more than this amount for their public library systems. The library received \$7000 total, with \$3500 each from the city and the city school district.

To mark the Library's upcoming 50th anniversary, a woman who wished to remain anonymous gifted the Library with a book truck in 1938. The new Dodge truck chassis

was custom designed to hold about 1000 books on neat shelves. This vehicle would provide the means to bring library service into communities that did not have ready access to a library.

By the end of the 1930s, the number of books in the library collection exceeded 95,000 volumes, and the library subscribed to about 200 magazines. About half of library circulation was to Luzerne County residents who lived outside of Wilkes-Barre city. The library tried to convince the county commissioners to allocate \$10,000 annually to support its services to residents across Wyoming Valley. The school board, after only 3 years of providing it, had announced they would withdraw the \$3500 library allocation. The North and South branches were reduced to 2 days of service each week and the directors announced that those branches would soon face closure without adequate funding.

Mary Baker resigned her position in order to become superintendent of circulation in the public library in Seattle, WA.



**In August of 1937 a Harvey's Lake man spent eight days in jail for not returning eight Osterhout library books.** The books had been in a friend's car, and that friend had moved to Pittsburgh. When seven of the books were returned by mail, he was released. Miss Baker noted that if our area had better means of book distribution, people—such as the man from Harvey's Lake—would not need to travel so far for the free privilege of borrowing books.





# Grace W. Estes 1940-1957



Grace W. Estes

Grace Estes came to the Osterhout from a position in the Public Library Division of the American Library Association in Chicago. A native of Massachusetts, she had worked in libraries in Wisconsin, Ohio, and Minnesota.

In 1943, though serving some 77 communities in Luzerne County, the county government did not contribute any money to the library as they had promised. A library report outlined the relevance of services the library was providing during wartime, “anticipating the types of printed materials needed to answer specified questions on military service, the countries to which our young men and women are being sent, new government regulations and agencies, labor problems and civilian defense activities.”

In 1945 it was decided that those who own property, work, or attend school in Wilkes-Barre may borrow freely from the library. Persons, however, who live in a municipality with a tax-supported library, must get a non-resident card, at the cost of \$2 per year, in order to have borrower privileges.

For many years the library maintained files of pictures. By 1950, this collection had grown to over 6000 images. They were requested and borrowed by

teachers, groups, stores, and artists among others. Also in 1950, the library was gifted with a record cabinet and began to lend 78 rpm records. The collection began with only about 100 titles, and a small fee was charged to borrow each record. (This fee was discontinued in 1968.) In 1952, the library began to cover each book with a clear plastic cover, offering protection as well as making the books on the shelves look nicer.

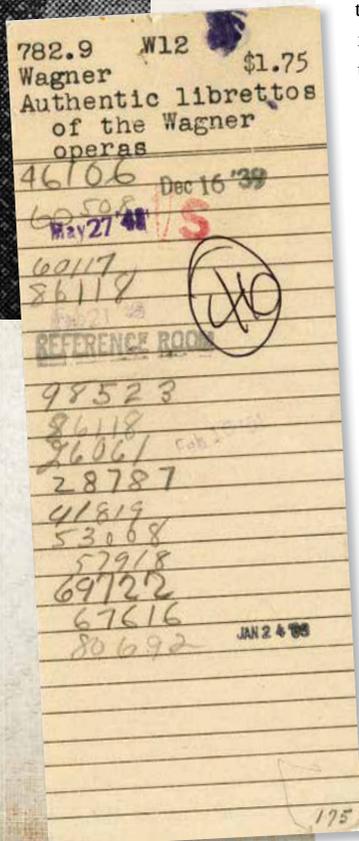
Although the library had been visiting schools for storytelling sessions from 1905 until the present, the 1950s showed increased involvement with local school districts. Collections of books were deposited for long-term use in schools where libraries were insubstantial or non-existent. Librarians worked with teachers in obtaining quality materials to meet their needs in the classroom.

In 1954, a meeting room was added to the first floor at the rear of the building. The library was the site of many interesting exhibitions at this time. In 1956, The Museum of Modern Art loaned 19 paintings which were displayed in the library, in an event sponsored by the Wyoming Valley Art League. The Smithsonian provided Indian paintings by George Catlin for a 10-day exhibit, and sketches and watercolors by Karl Bodmer for a 20-day exhibit.



A record player with headsets, called a Califone, was installed in the library in 1956. Patrons could preview records before borrowing, or even study foreign language recordings in the library. Two people could listen to a record at the same time, without any noise to disturb other library users.

Grace Estes retired on April 1, 1957 and moved to Wisconsin to live with her sisters.



# Elizabeth Hesser 1957-1972



Elizabeth Hesser

Elizabeth Hesser came to the Osterhout from the Indianapolis Public Library. She had previously worked in libraries in Lockport NY, and Baltimore.

“Due to increased costs of operation, which have resulted in deficits for the last several years, the Library announces with regret that, effective January 1, 1959, free borrowing privileges must be confined to bona fide residents or taxpayers of the city of Wilkes-Barre.” These persons could use the library without charge, since both the municipality and school district provide funding. However, as had happened in the past, non-residents would be charged: \$1 for children; \$2 for students ninth grade through college; \$3 for adults; and \$4 for a card to be used by all members of a family.

The Georgetown branch closed at the start of 1959, as Wilkes-Barre Township would

no longer provide funding. The Swoyersville branch closed later that year when the municipality would not subsidize the increased cost of operating the branch.

In 1962, the Osterhout began to operate as the District Library Center under the Pennsylvania Plan for Library Development, which divided the state into 29 such districts. This required providing reference service and library materials to residents of Luzerne and Wyoming County west of the Susquehanna River. In 1966, the library obtained a truck in order to make weekly deliveries of books requested at eight other libraries in the county, and to pick up returns. Eventually, rotating collections of 50-200 books on a given subject were exchanged between these libraries for several months at a time. The library also installed its first photocopy equipment this year.

An addition to the library building was undertaken in 1965. This added a cataloging department and a staff room to the second floor rear of the building. The library board was seriously considering options for building a new library. They found the existing structure, as well as that of the branches, inadequate to provide services to the community.



In 1968, the Osterhout was the recipient of federal grant money, along with eight other libraries in the region, to experiment with a new means of inter-library loan. Seven project libraries were equipped with teletypewriters connected to a statewide network. The shared catalog of these Northeastern Pennsylvania libraries was hosted at the King’s College Library in Wilkes-Barre.

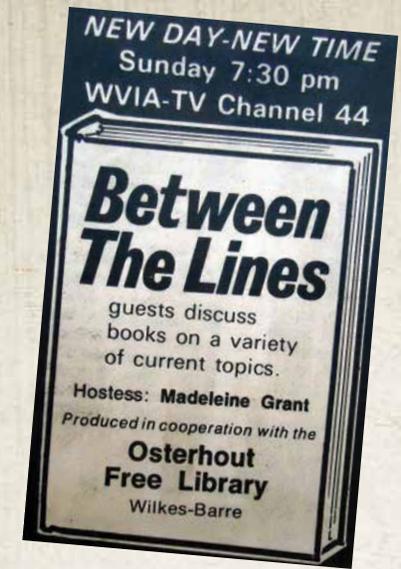
Elizabeth Hesser submitted her resignation in November of 1972, effective January 1, 1973. She stated it would be best to have someone who would likely be working for many years ahead to guide the library following the destruction caused by the flood in June of 1972.



## Plains Branch

In 1968, Plains Township Commissioners approached the Osterhout about establishing a branch in their community. A grant allowed work to begin in March of that year. Congressman Dan Flood cut the ribbon to open the library on November 4, 1968. The original collection of 6000 volumes was

housed in a room in the Municipal Offices at 126 North Main Street built specifically for that purpose, and which it has continually occupied. In 1973, its collection had grown to 9000 volumes, as well as 68 magazine subscriptions, and a large collection of record albums.



Beginning in the fall of 1971, the library was involved in producing a weekly television program on public television, WWIA-TV. “Between the Lines” was hosted by the Community Relations Coordinator of the Osterhout, first Maureen Klapproth, then her successor Madeleine Grant. The program aired weekly and featured local guests and famous authors discussing books on a variety of current topics. By its third season, in 1973, a package of 8 episodes was being distributed to educational stations across the country, including those in major metropolitan areas. A second show on public television at this time was called “Once Upon a Time.” Geared toward younger viewers, the Osterhout children’s librarian, Loretta Farris, was the featured storyteller. In the same era, the library also broadcast a radio story hour for children on the Wilkes College radio station, WCLH.

# The Flood

On the morning of June 23, 1972, the effects of Hurricane Agnes caused the Susquehanna River to overflow its levees and deluge the floodplain of the Wyoming Valley. The library, located half a city block from the river bank, was inundated by about five feet of muddy water on its ground floor. In the aftermath, it was estimated that approximately 70,000 of the library's 125,000 volumes were destroyed, as well as the entire collections of magazines, newspapers, and record albums. Extensive work was required to remove the mud and dust that covered everything, and to replace the shelves, fixtures, and equipment which had been destroyed. First the library building needed to dry out. Damage was estimated at \$1.3 million dollars, of which insurance covered \$770,000. The branches had not been directly affected by the flooding and continued to operate.

The entire card catalog had been destroyed, but the shelf list had survived. This simplified the creation of new catalog cards for all the remaining items. Building the library collection was a priority, and though it took years, by 1975 there were 125,000 books on the shelves.

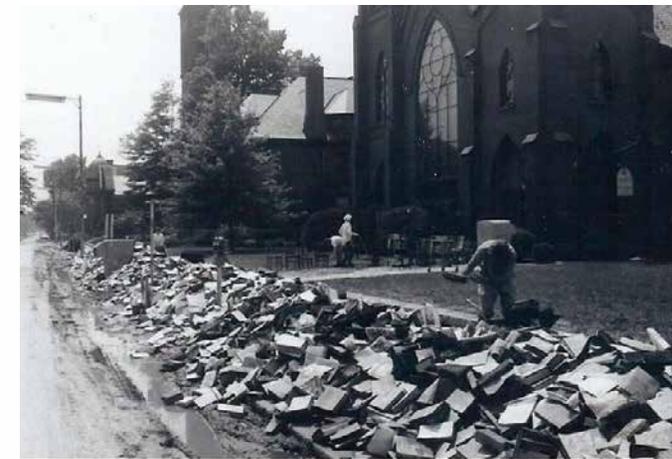
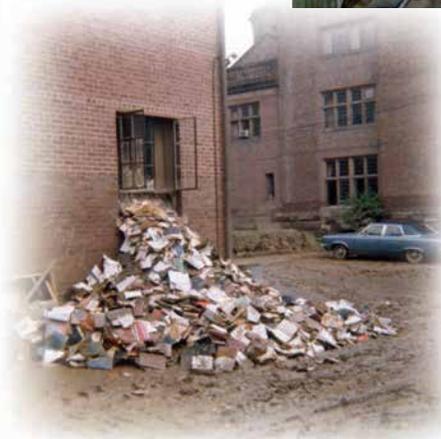
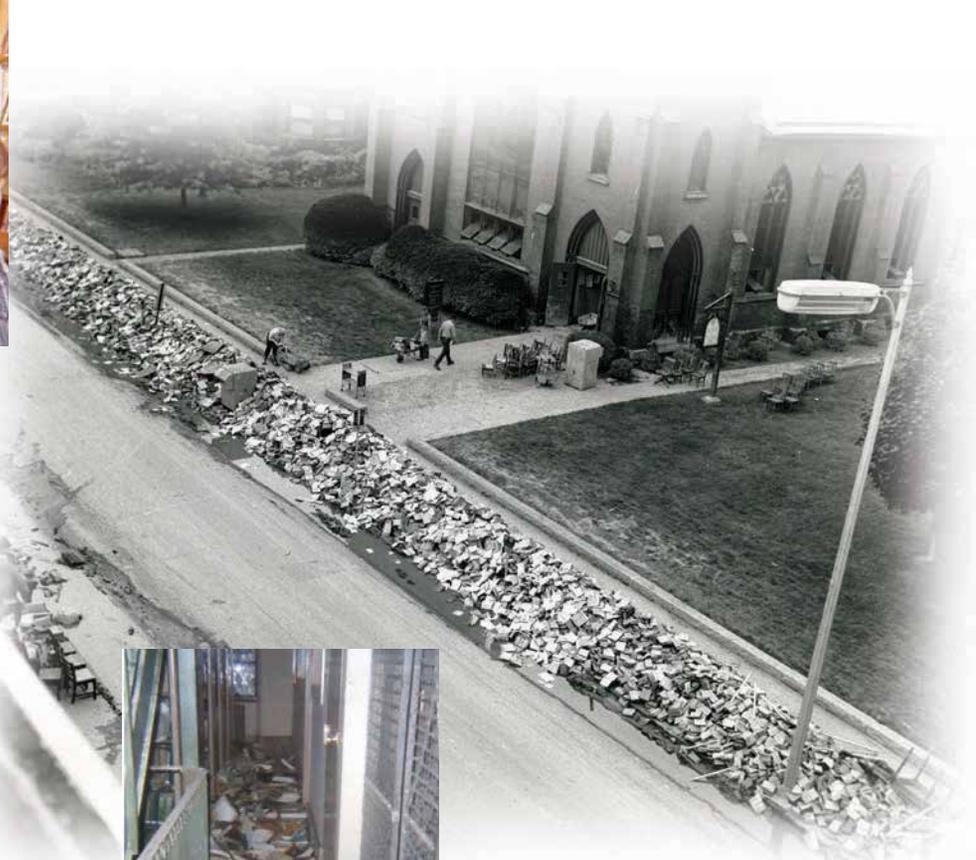
Library staff worked tirelessly to assist in cleanup and restoration. Drying out and disinfecting many books, including irreplaceable volumes of local history, was a priority. A more vigorous task was hauling books, waterlogged and beyond help, out to the curb, where they were taken away forever by city crews.

About two months after the flood, the library began to offer its services from two large bookmobiles loaned by the Wilkes-Barre Area School District. Parked on the library

lawn, the trucks were stocked with books from the Library collection that had survived the flood, new purchases, and about 13,000 volumes lent from the Scranton Public Library. The bookmobiles provided service each weekday from 10am-6pm.

By December, the Reference Department announced it was back in business, serving the public with what resources it had been able to obtain by that time. The stack wing was also opened. The Children's Department had been holding storytimes in a bookmobile, and at different sites around town, throughout the fall. On January 29, 1973, the Library resumed delivery service of interlibrary loan materials for the first time since June. A new van replaced the delivery truck which had been ruined in the flood.

The library re-opened on May 1, 1973.



# Joan M. Costello 1973-1997



Joan M. Costello

Joan Costello was hired as the sixth director of the Library, and began work on January 15, 1973. In the 83 years of the library's existence, she was to be the first, and only, Wilkes-Barre native to hold the

position. While in high school, she had been a page at the Osterhout, and later worked as a member of the Adult Services staff. She had been assistant director of the Scranton Public Library since June, 1968.

In the 1970s, the library's film department loaned 16mm films as well as projectors on which to play them. The library van also functioned as a "moviemobile," visiting parks, playgrounds, and Public Square and showing films in the evening hours. The library began lending framed art prints to hang in your home for 3 months. The children's department began lending toys for home use. For a few years, Sunday hours were added to the schedule and were very popular. They had to be cut in 1976 when the Wilkes-Barre Area School District cut \$40,000 from its \$80,000 appropriation to the library. In 1978, the other \$40,000 was withdrawn. That year 46% of the operating expenses were covered by income from the original Osterhout endowment and subsequent bequests; 28% was state aid, and only 26% was financed by funds from the local government. The director stated that there probably was not another public library of equal size in the

entire country which received such minimal support from its local government.

A capital campaign to raise \$700,000 was begun in 1980. This money would be used to fund the construction of an addition to the building, providing over 3000 square feet specifically for the children's collection and services, with space for 40,000 books. The children's department was operating out of 540 square feet in the main library area, and half of the children's books—which numbered about 31,000 volumes—were stored on the third floor of the stack wing and thus were not accessible to children.

The wing was designed to complement the existing architecture. As the new construction was built adjacent to an entire exterior wall of the 1908 stack wing, six of the 2-story leaded windows that would be hidden were removed and incorporated into the front and side of the new children's wing. Another project at this time was providing air conditioning to the entire building. On October 3, 1982, the dedication of the Ken L. Pollock Children's Wing was held, named for the benefactor who gave \$100,000 to the project.

On April 25, 1983, the Library hosted a visit from Barbara Bush, wife of Vice President George Bush. She toured the new children's wing and read a storybook to a group of preschoolers. Her visit was part of "a campaign to rekindle public interest in library support."

The library collection had grown to include 168,000 books, 10,000 records and cassettes, 800 films, and 11,000 paperbacks.

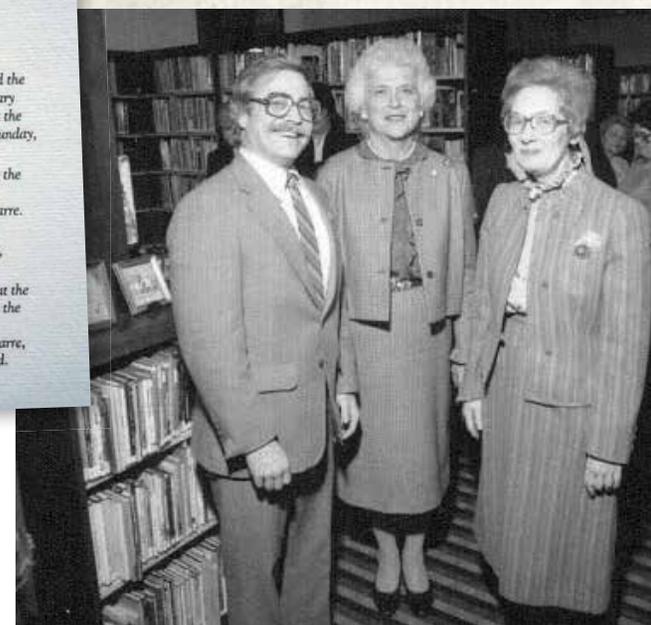
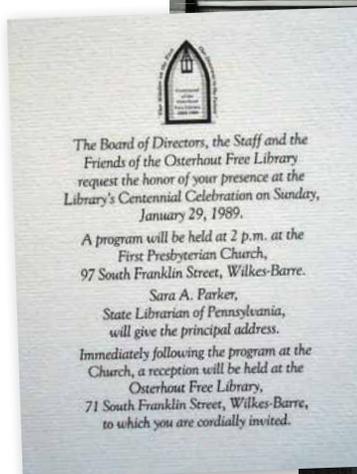
In 1989, the library celebrated its centennial



with guest speakers and special events throughout the year funded by the Friends of the Library.



Joan Costello retired in 1997.



# The Friends of the Library began organizing shortly after the Agnes Flood.



The group formed officially in 1977. They would raise funds to help the library by holding bake sales, selling bookmarks, and hosting events such as wine and cheese tastings and fundraising dinners. The annual book sale, which grows larger each year, has become its signature event. All money raised by the Friends goes directly to support the library's mission.

In late June of 2007, a package arrived at the library addressed to The Friends of the Osterhout. "I do not recall how I obtained it, but it is obviously past due." The writer, was referring to the enclosed copy of Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* which was 40 years overdue. This person who wished to remain anonymous, also enclosed a check for \$5000. "As a young child, I spent many joyful hours in the library surrounded by many fascinating books. I loved to read, and having books that my family could not afford to purchase enabled me to have a better life."



## Diane T. Suffren 1997-2007



Diane T. Suffren

Diane Suffren was the head of the Reference Department at the Osterhout when she was selected for the position of Director in 1997. She had worked at the library since 1981.

In 1999, after 2 years of planning, the Library closed its doors for several weeks to begin a \$535,000 renovation project. Extensive changes to the library layout were undertaken. The walls were painted, and new furniture, shelving, and lighting were installed. The 90-year old elevator was replaced, and modern restrooms were added. When the main library was able to re-open, the Children's Wing closed for a short while for some updating of its own.

Another major development at this time involved the libraries of the Luzerne County Library System finally becoming automated and introducing a county-wide library card. This automated circulation system allowed for the use of one library card at all ten libraries in the system. Likewise, the online catalog allowed one to search in any of the libraries, or in all of them at once, to locate an item. The Osterhout and its branches closed for one week in February to put barcodes on every item.

The library collection had reached more than 284,000 items; including 200,000 books as well as records, cassettes, compact discs, 16mm films, videocassettes, filmstrips, slides, paperbacks, framed art prints, pamphlets,

magazines, newspapers, telephone directories, and various equipment such as projectors and VCRs that could be borrowed.

The library building was in need of extensive renovation, and Mrs. Suffren had written the grants to secure the funding necessary to cover these projects.

Diane Suffren submitted her resignation in September, 2007. In October, she was honored with a citation by Rep. Phyllis Mundy who stated, "Under her leadership, the library improved by leaps and bounds in terms of technology and internet services, as well as with increased services to the community."



Osterhout Free Library 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

## Sara D. Hansen 2008-2011



Sara D. Hansen

Sara Hansen began as Director in February of 2008. Mrs. Hansen came from the Lakewood Branch of the Ocean County Library System, in Red Bank, NJ.

The North Branch had been displaced by fire the previous July, so her first major project was coordinating its relocation.

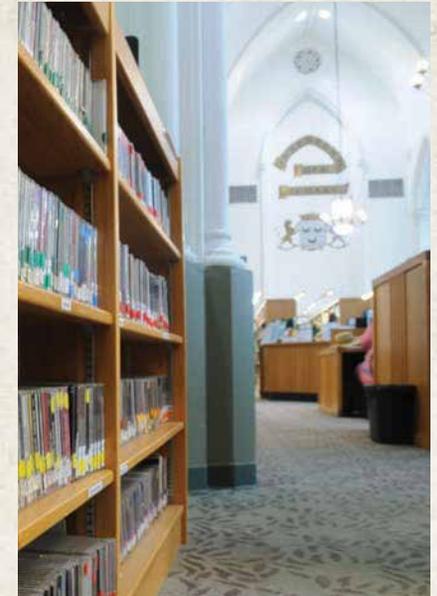
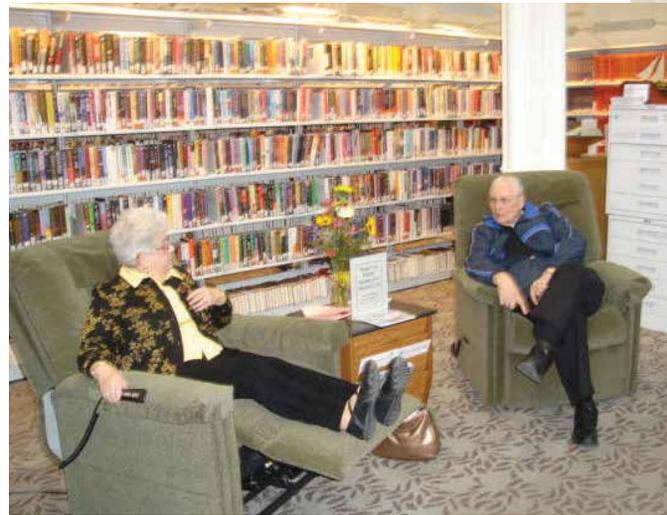
Under her guidance, the major renovation plans for the central library, initiated by Mrs. Suffren were put into effect. These projects were long overdue, but necessary to ensuring the library building remained both

beautiful and structurally sound. The roof, consisting of terra cotta and slate, required repair. A complete masonry restoration was undertaken to repair the deteriorating exterior brickwork of the old church and the stack wing. This included removing the top fifteen feet of the bell tower and rebuilding it, brick by brick, using the original materials whenever possible. Many of the leaded glass windows, all of which were at least a hundred years old, were carefully removed, transported offsite, and painstakingly restored. The renovations were completed in June of 2009.

In April 2010, the Library unveiled its "Classic Corner," a space designed to promote

materials and activities to library users over the age of 50. The area includes comfortable chairs and resources of interest to that age group. The area is adjacent to the large print book section.

Sara Hansen resigned in March of 2011 to become Director of the Old Bridge Public Library in Old Bridge, NJ.



## Richard C. Miller 2011-

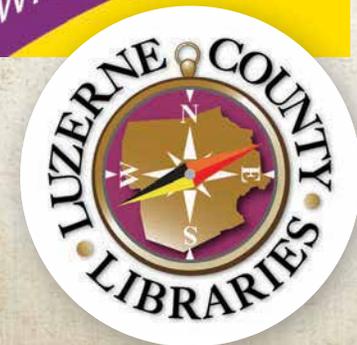
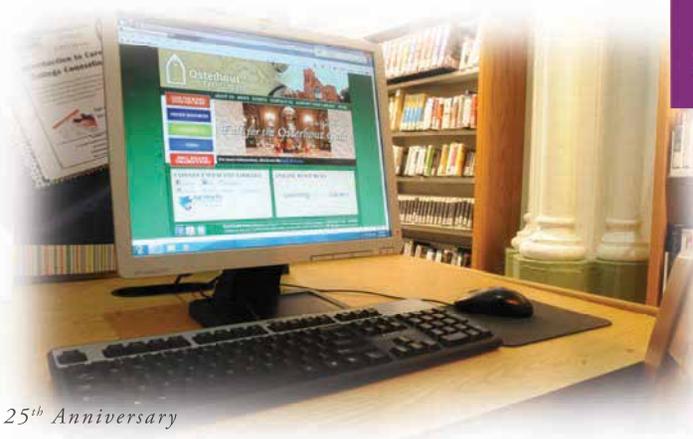


Richard C. Miller

Richard C. Miller began as Executive Director of the Osterhout Free Library in September of 2011. A native of Berwick, PA, he was the Director of Library Services at the McBride Memorial

Library. In keeping with the examples of his

predecessors, Mr. Miller works to provide the community with exemplary library services.



# The Library at 125

On January 29, 2014, the library celebrated its 125th Anniversary by opening at 10am and inviting the public to a celebratory reception. This reflected the same date and time that the library had first opened its doors to the public a century and a quarter before. Though the library may still be filled with books, there have been incredible changes to the library collection throughout its history, most recently with electronic books (eBooks) and other electronic content made available by the Luzerne County Library System.

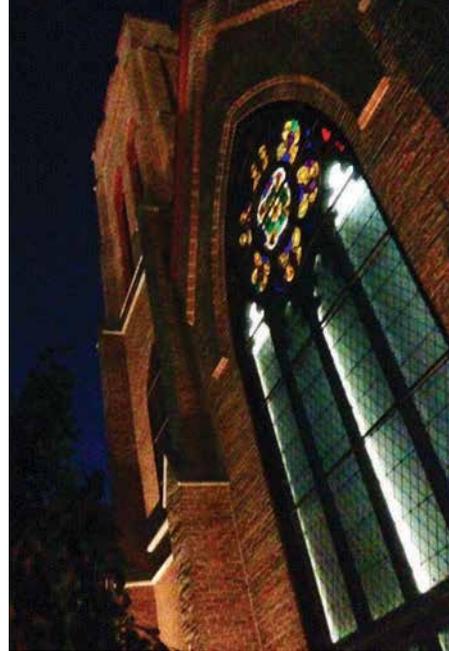
The Library was born of the generous spirit of its benefactor and strengthened by subsequent bequests through the years. It has been guided by all the board members, directors, and staff who served many generations of families throughout Wyoming Valley.

The Osterhout Free Library continues to serve all people of all ages, and its history is truly reflective of Melvil Dewey's prescient words at the Library's dedication:

*"The Public Library –  
the People's University."*

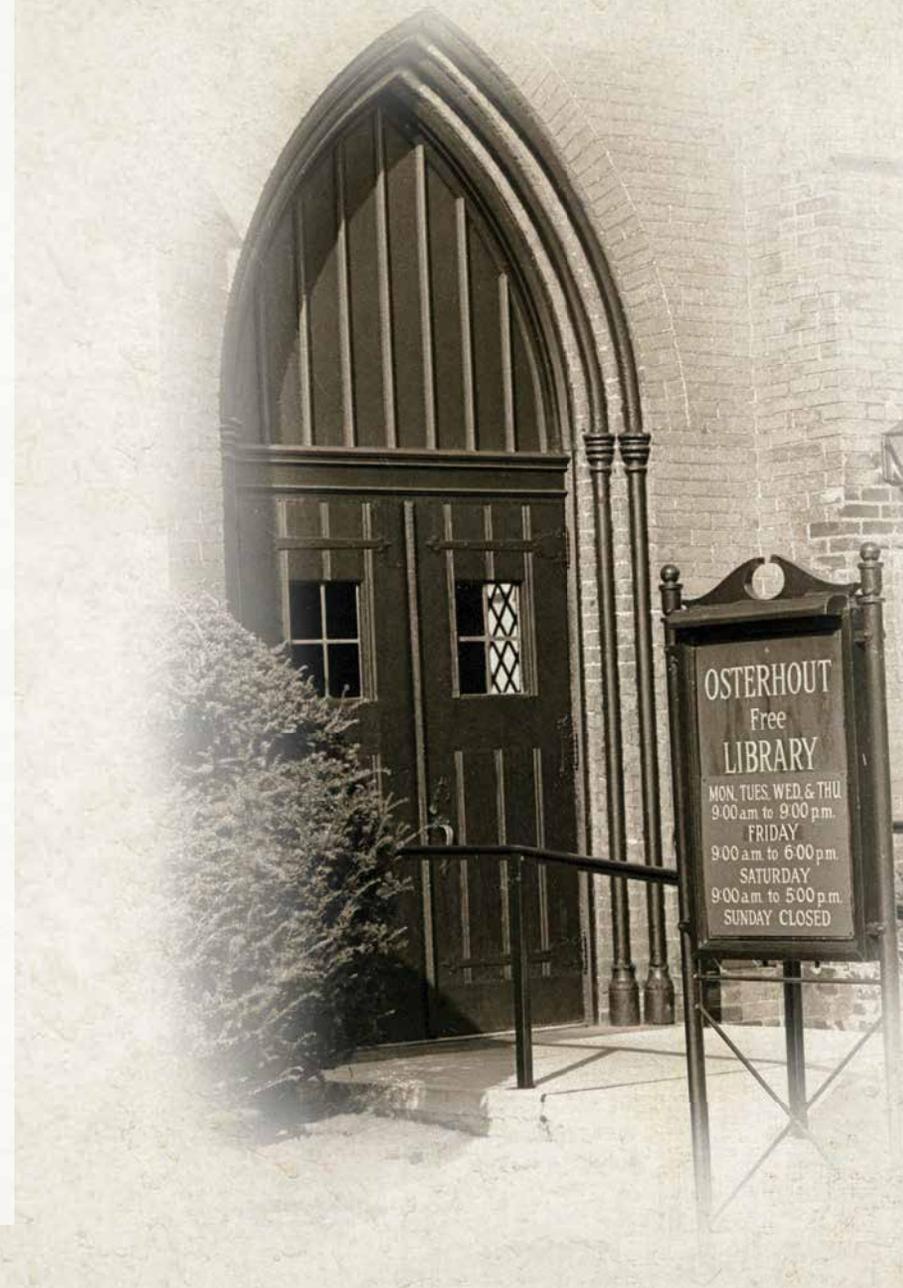


**The Osterhout  
Free Library**



## Osterhout Free Library Board Presidents

<i>1882-1885</i>	Edward P. Darling
<i>1885-1886</i>	Edward P. Darling
<i>1886-1889</i>	Edmund L. Dana
<i>1889</i>	Edmund P. Darling
<i>1889-1891</i>	Lewis C. Paine
<i>1891-1893</i>	Hubbard B. Payne
<i>1893-1915</i>	Henry L. Jones, S.T.D.
<i>1915-1924</i>	George R. Bedford
<i>1924-1929</i>	Lewis H. Taylor, M.D.
<i>1929-1932</i>	Hon. Henry A. Fuller
<i>1932-1934</i>	Lord Butler Hillard
<i>1934-1936</i>	William L. Conyngham
<i>1936-1948</i>	Charles H. Miner, M.D.
<i>1948-1960</i>	Paul Bedford
<i>1960-1969</i>	Bernard Burgunder
<i>1969-1972</i>	Charles H. Miner, Jr., Esq.
<i>1972-1974</i>	John W. McCormick, Esq.
<i>1974-1977</i>	Mrs. Horace E. Kramer
<i>1977-1981</i>	Arthur Silverblatt, Esq.
<i>1981-1986</i>	Ellis W. Roberts, Ph.D.
<i>1986-1991</i>	Charles B. Reif, Ph.D.
<i>1991-1997</i>	Wesley B. Simmers
<i>1997-1998</i>	Neil M. Seidel
<i>1998-2003</i>	John A. Bednarz, Jr., Esq.
<i>2003-2005</i>	Susan Sordoni, M.D.
<i>2005-2008</i>	Maureen M. Bufalino
<i>2008-2010</i>	Stephen Rosenthal
<i>2010-2012</i>	Patricia Finan Castellano
<i>2012-2014</i>	Linda Gramlich
<i>2014-</i>	Kathleen Dunsmuir



## Editors

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Tiffany Lukashewski  
Edward Lupico  
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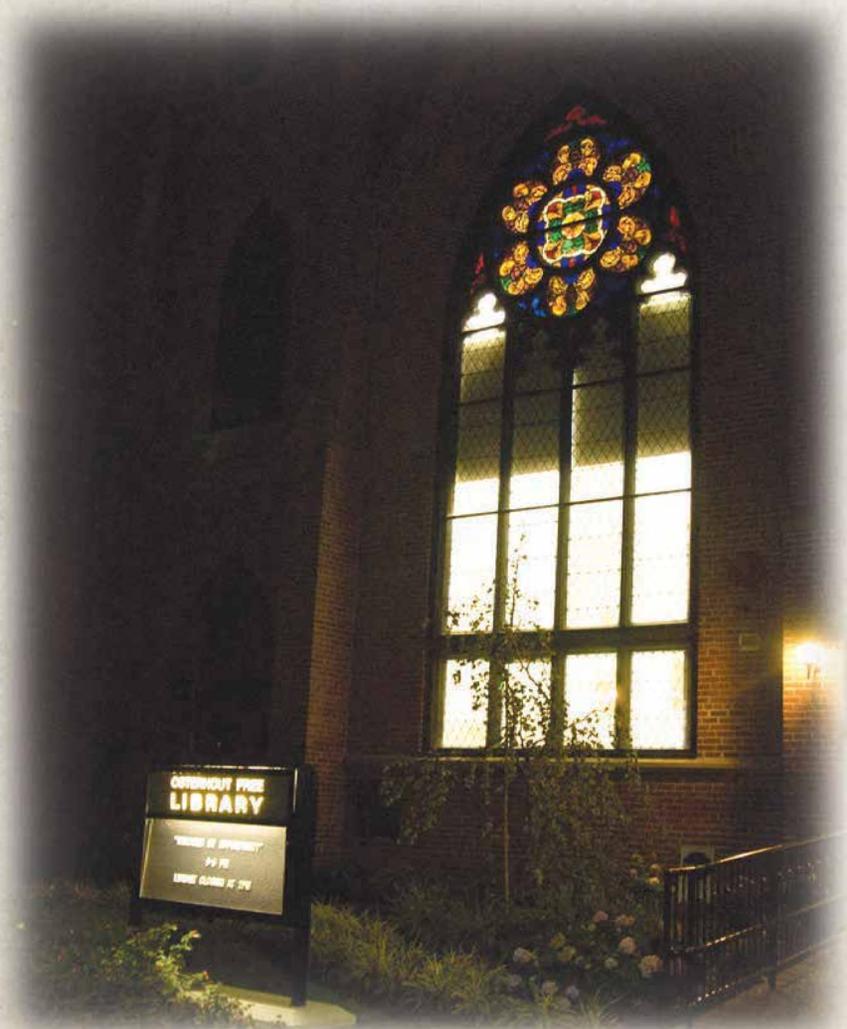
## Sources

The contents of this publication were derived from the archives and collection of the Osterhout Free Library. Several photographs are reprinted with permission from the collection of the Luzerne County Historical Society. Three previous accounts of the Library's evolution provided a foundation for this history:

Kramer, Mary K. "A Noble Gift" (November 1970)

Valentine, Mary E. "History of the Osterhout Free Library of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania" (c. 1935)

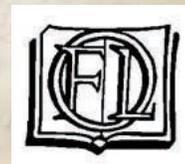
Roberts, Ellis W. "A Brief Biography of Isaac Smith Osterhout and the Founding of the Osterhout Free Library" (1989)



## The Osterhout Free Library

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*Support for this publication  
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