

As we weather this storm together, the Staff of Thayer Memorial Library looks forward to reopening and serving you and your family in person once again.

Eventually, COVID-19 will pass, and we will experience together the new normal of post-pandemic Lancaster, just as our townspeople did in post-Civil War America.

For now, let's return to mid-nineteenth century Lancaster.

Thayer Memorial Library
Lancaster, Massachusetts

Part 2

A LIBRARY BORN IN CRISIS The Heart of the Public Library

Today the Thayer Memorial Library resides on Lancaster's Town Green. When it was called the Lancaster Town Library, the building's foundation was much smaller than that of the Library's current structure. Memorial Hall was built in 1868 only three years after the Civil War ended and six years since the citizens formed the town public library. This was Lancaster's first public library building, but it was much more than that.

By mid-1865, the Civil War was over. According to that year's census, Lancaster's population had declined from 1,932 citizens in 1860 to 1,752 by the end of the war. Life would slowly return to normal in Lancaster, and the focus of its citizens turned towards other practical worries. Perhaps the chief of these concerns was the manner in which the Town would honor the Lancastrians that perished during the War of the Rebellion. Another was finding an acceptable place for the collection of library books that could no longer fit the overflowing upper room of Town Hall.

Soon there was talk around Town to erect a monument venerating Lancaster's fallen soldiers. Then at the April 1866 town meeting, citizens appropriated \$5,000 for such a structure, adding it would be a building for public use, with fitting memorial tablets listing the names who perished and inspirational inscriptions on its walls. It would accommodate a library, furnish a fire-proof space for safe-keeping of the town's records, provide additional areas to conduct Town affairs, and provide ample display spaces for the sizeable collection of historical artifacts collected by the Town.

On November 7, 1866, a committee of seven men was chosen to erect Memorial Hall: Nathaniel Thayer; George M. Bartol; Jacob Fisher; Henry Wilder; J.L.S. Thompson; Quincy Whitney; and Dr. Edward M. Fuller. Soon after, the First Church of Christ generously apportioned a patch of its land requiring no remuneration. The building would reside directly in view of the Town Green, where the Lancaster soldiers mustered before going to war. On June 17, 1868, Memorial Hall was dedicated in a triumphant ceremony signifying a new age of hope, peace, and prosperity for all.

This combination of Civil War memorial and public library embodied the character and attitude of the Lancastrians who had lived during a time of chaos, destruction, and death. Memorial Hall was the physical manifestation of what Lancaster citizens held dear and valued in life – those who had sacrificed for the greater good, lifelong learning, a strong community, and individual happiness. Alongside the works of writers who would remain immortal through their books, the names of the fallen would remain unforgotten in the minds of fellow Lancastrians. Memorial Hall would go on to symbolize Lancaster’s cultural identity and values to this day.

Both the structural form and name have evolved and changed over the turn of two centuries. Nevertheless, the spirit of the residents that built the Library can often be felt by visitors to Thayer Memorial Library today. Whether it's seeing people enter the rotunda for the first time, watching others consider the meaning of plaques honoring the dead, or merely seeing residents read while sitting in any of the stately wings that surround Memorial Hall, the spirit borne years ago still resides.

Perhaps chairman of the Library Committee George M. Bartol said it best in the March 1865 School Committee report regarding the value of the Library to the lives of citizens “... no part of our public expenditure does or can, all things considered, bring back a richer return.” Today, Lancaster residents continue to embrace words spoken more than 150 years ago, with the same affection.

Up next - Why the name Thayer Memorial Library?

Karen Silverthorn, Assistant Director/Adult Services Library, Thayer Memorial Library

Member, Lancaster Historical Commission

Executive Board Member, Lancaster Historical Society

April 14, 2020