

The Staff of Thayer Memorial Library wishes you and your family good health and safety during the COVID-19 public health crisis. We miss seeing everyone and look forward to serving you once again, in person, at the Library when we reach the other side of this pandemic.

The citizens of Lancaster, like those elsewhere, are stepping up and reaching out to help one another in any way they can. This should not surprise us since that's what Lancastrians do and have done since 1653.

The Lancaster community has been through other national and world emergencies over the centuries. Wars, destructive forces of nature, and epidemics have been part of Lancaster's history. Throughout times past, as well as today, the spirit and will of Lancastrians always has and will continue to prevail.

Our current crisis brings to mind another time when a different internal enemy threatened to destroy the lives and existence of every single American – both young and old. A small part of Lancaster's and Thayer Memorial Library's history can remind us all of what Lancastrians are capable of doing for one another during a crisis, including inaugurating a public library.

Step back in time to the origins of the Thayer Memorial Library.

A LIBRARY BORN IN CRISIS

"... a general diffusion of knowledge has a tendency, not only to promote happiness, but to strengthen the bonds of society ...", agreed the Proprietors of Lancaster at their October 4, 1790 meeting which was held to establish the [Lancaster Social Library](#), frame its by-laws, and choose books to purchase. Thus, the underlying philosophical foundation of what a library should be was set in place. As time marched on, there would never be a time when Lancaster would be without some type of a library.

Through many iterations and expansions, the "public" library that the original founders envisioned in 1862 has never lost its original purpose. Today, Thayer Memorial Library's mission continues to be, in part, that of diffusing knowledge, promoting happiness, and strengthening the bonds of society.

Standing on Lancaster's Town Green today, Thayer Memorial Library remains a symbol of the community's wish to bring people, information, and ideas together to enrich lives for its citizens. Continuity of services may have been temporarily disrupted during times of war, epidemics, destructive forces of nature, and internal building issues, but never for long. The resilience of the Library, like that of its citizens, has been steadfast.

The ability of this institution to respond to crises may be due in part to its establishment in a time of crisis – the Civil War or the War of the Rebellion, as it was called at that time.

620,000 men died during the Civil War, which lasted from April 12, 1861 – April 9, 1865. In today's numbers, which consider a more substantial national population, this toll would have risen as high as 6 million lives. From Lancaster, 39 men gave their lives to the Cause.

19th-century historian and writer Rev. Abijah P. Marvin wrote* that in 1861, when the rebellion broke out, Lancastrians were prepared to act and rallied to defend their country at once. On Monday, April 15, 1861, President Abraham Lincoln publicly called for troops to fight the rebellion and defend our nation. The following Monday, April 22, patriotic enthusiasm erupted at a special Lancaster town meeting, and nearly forty Lancaster men began to actively prepare for war.

Lancaster's citizens banded together, providing clothing and necessities to soldiers, supplying arms for the Cause, giving physical, and often financial support and comfort to the families of the Lancaster soldiers who were fighting to defend the Union. Between town-paid expenses, contributions from citizens, 'gifts by ladies' (from their benevolent societies and women's groups), total expenditures for the war effort equaled \$26,264.52, nearly \$775,000 today.

This was a tremendous sum of money for a town the size of Lancaster to sacrifice. According to the 1860 census, 1,932 people were counted as citizens. However, rallying for the country was not the only thing Lancastrians put their minds to during the war. Citizens also established by vote of the Town a free public library as well. On October 4, the Lancaster Town Library opened on the second floor of the then Town Hall with approximately 1,200 volumes in the collection.

Former Lancaster Library Director Marge Fischer (1981-1991) wrote: "Residents of the town were acutely conscious of the increased tax burden imposed by the war, which forced reductions in vital areas, education included. It was not a favorable time to consider the added expense of creating a new public institution. That the necessary tax appropriation was made for the purpose despite the political, human, and economic chaos inflicted by the war, says much about the prevailing sense of values and priorities in this town at that time."

Knowing the generosity of Lancaster citizens today, it is no surprise that, as the Civil War progressed, the Library's collection of books grew in number from purchases funded in no small part by municipal funds and private donations. As Town Hall became overcrowded with volumes of books, citizens soon realized the need to construct a separate building to house the ever-growing collection and the increase in demand for library services.

Next up, **Lancaster Public Library after the Civil War.**

**History of the Town of Lancaster, Massachusetts: From the First Settlement to the Present Time, 1643-1879, by Rev. Abijah P. Marvin (copies available in hardcopy at TML and online at www.thayermemoriallibrary.org)*

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