

“No Drones in the Hive, but a Strong Army of Workers”<sup>1</sup> – A Brief History of the Women  
Behind Waupaca’s Carnegie Library

Taylor Schmidt

Third Year (Junior)

Major: English Literature, History, Medieval and Renaissance Studies Certificate

[tschm291@uwsp.edu](mailto:tschm291@uwsp.edu)

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<sup>1</sup> Quote taken from the 25 June 1897 issue of the *Republican*, a Waupaca Newspaper, in reference to the need for leadership in the quest to bring a library to the county.

“Grant that we may realize it is the little things that create differences: that in the big things of life we are one.”

—Mary Stewart, “Federation Pledge—A Collect for Club Women,” April 1904

Carnegie Libraries are often treated as monoliths. Their architecture makes them distinct from each other and surrounding buildings, but the process of their establishment narrows to a three-act performance. First, the unnamed players decide that a library is needed. Second, they solicit funding from Carnegie, and build the library according to his specifications. Third, an architectural marvel opens, to be studied for its unique structure and stylistic blend in perpetuity. A Carnegie Library serves as an interesting building in whatever town one happens to land in and, unless it is preserved or converted, remains *only* that until the jurisdiction deems the space it occupies more important than the building itself. This research centers around those formerly mentioned unnamed players and, through research into the Carnegie Library at 321 S. Main Street, Waupaca, seeks to name them.

Those shadowed figures in the establishment, creation, and management of Carnegie and other public libraries are women’s clubs, groups, and organizations. Although their roles were often overshadowed and, in some cases, written off entirely, women’s clubs and organizations were instrumental in creating the American public library system. The American Library Association wrote in 1933 that 75% of the public libraries that were established by that point—many of which had been built using Carnegie funding—were founded by women.<sup>2</sup> Through close inspection of the Waupaca Public Library’s<sup>3</sup> conception, creation, and management, and by

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<sup>2</sup> Sophonisba P. Breckinridge, *Women in the Twentieth Century: A Study of Their Political, Social and Economic Activities* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1933; New York: Arno, 1972), 93

<sup>3</sup> A surviving Carnegie library located at 321 S. Main Street in Waupaca, Wisconsin, within the United States of America. It has since been utilized as a headquarters for the local branch of the historical society and as a meeting place for local genealogical researchers and inquiring minds. Many of the archival materials utilized in this research are housed there, as indicated in relevant citations.

thoroughly investigating the operations of the clubs that urged its establishment, one conclusion was apparent—women’s organizations fought to bring libraries to their communities. Those libraries returned their investments by providing women with local administrative power and the means to congregate and educate each other. It was the Woman’s Club of Waupaca and the Monday Night Club that prompted the creation of the Waupaca Public Library, and their oft forgotten role in its creation bears recognition and reverence of equal magnitude to those patrons, like Carnegie, who sponsored their efforts.

Prior to 1985, women’s roles in the founding of public libraries were explicitly dismissed. One book by Sydney Ditzion from 1945 devotes only a paragraph to the subject, “reject[ing] the notion that their contribution was of any importance.”<sup>4</sup> One of his contemporaries, George Bobinski, said much the same in his book *Carnegie Libraries*, stating that he “[did] not identify women’s clubs as having any special place as the driving force for Carnegie grants.”<sup>5</sup> Historical perception of women’s clubs and their role in the founding of libraries evolved after those books’ publication, with one particular wave of research cresting between the mid-1980s and early 2000s. In her article “Founding Mothers: The Contribution of Women’s Organizations to Public Library Development in the United States,” Paula Watson subverts this tradition of erasure by intentionally marking the role of women’s organizations in these actions, including their advocacy for legislation and their role in soliciting Carnegie funding.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Paula D. Watson. “Founding Mothers: The Contribution of Women’s Organizations to Public Library Development in the United States.” *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* no. 3 (1994): 237.

<sup>5</sup> Watson, 237.

<sup>6</sup> Watson, 239, 242-243.

Women's clubs and organizations came to be a formidable force on the path towards progress in women's rights and education. In the 1997 article "The 'Ladies of the Club' and Caroline Bartlett Crane: Affiliation and Alienation in Progressive Social Reform," Linda J. Rynbrandt states that, while it was believed that a woman's place was in the home, the sphere of "home" could be "enlarged to incorporate those outside influences that would have an impact on the home and family."<sup>7</sup> Women, she argued, were seen as protectors of the home, and therefore had justifiable reason to venture beyond it. The desires of women to read, write, and seek education were markedly transgressive, so strategies relating to terminology and framing<sup>8</sup> were employed to make them seem less severe.<sup>9</sup> Educated women circumvented the consequences of transgression by appealing to convention,<sup>10</sup> and then used that education to teach others through club meetings and lessons later in life.<sup>11</sup> All of this crystallized in the existing principal of "municipal housekeeping," which described the use of traditional gender roles to grant women power over their communities through the extension of household duties and their assumed position as a moral center.<sup>12</sup> It was fitting, then, that the libraries such women helped to fund were seen as domestic centers of their communities, blending the perceived innate morality and motherhood of women with the fatherly dominion of their male patrons, the most famous of which being Andrew Carnegie.

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<sup>7</sup> Rynbrandt, 205.

<sup>8</sup> Such as the use of the term "seminary" rather than "college" and the framing of education as a domestic pursuit. Many of the Club Women who would contribute to the founding of libraries were seminary educated.

<sup>9</sup> Scott, 401-403.

<sup>10</sup> Jill Mulvay Derr. "Scholarship, Service, and Sisterhood: Women's Clubs and Associations, 1877-1977." In *Women In Utah History: Paradigm Or Paradox?*, edited by Patricia Lyn Scott and Linda Thatcher. (University Press of Colorado, 2005), 251.

<sup>11</sup> "Record of Secretary—Monday Night Club," 3 March 1902 to 21 January 1907, Held in Monday Night Club exhibit at the Waupaca Historical Society, 321 S. Main Street, Waupaca, Wisconsin.

<sup>12</sup> Rynbrandt, 204-208.

Carnegie libraries were referred to as “cultural artifacts” because of their unique architecture.<sup>13</sup> These libraries were utilized as places of education and community, however, and had significance beyond the aesthetic. Large, urban areas’ libraries were founded primarily by wealthy men because of the sense of moral duty tied to the paternal perception of patronage.<sup>14</sup> The founding of a library was a fatherly act that provided monetarily, morally, and intellectually for the “family”<sup>15</sup> and encouraged personal development, causes that the women’s groups involved in their creation also championed. Women, unlike the commercially minded male patrons who funded such ventures, were defensive against the invasion of governmental or professional figures in the structure of the library, falling back on Victorian ideals of womanhood to justify their place in the hierarchy.<sup>16</sup> Before any of these ideals could filter into a library itself, however, it first needed to exist.

The Woman’s Club of Waupaca<sup>17</sup> was first organized on July 20, 1896. On that warm, late summer day, the fifteen original members came together with two primary goals: to promote the education of women, and to establish a public library in Waupaca. It was important to these women that the library be free, as most large libraries in the state had membership fees that may have been inaccessible to people in a small town. These women would grow in number over the years, and another club, the Monday Night Club, would join them in their push for a library building. The members of these clubs were highly creative and literary-minded. They wrote

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<sup>13</sup> Abigail A. Van Slyck, *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries & American Culture, 1890-1920*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), xxvii.

<sup>14</sup> Van Slyck, 1, 4, 8-11.

<sup>15</sup> Family, in this case, meaning the broader surrounding community and user base of the library. Special figures among this population included children, unmarried men, and travelling folk.

<sup>16</sup> Van Slyck, 4, 8-11, 138-140.

<sup>17</sup> Hereafter referred to as simply the Woman’s Club

poems,<sup>18</sup> recited quotations during attendance,<sup>19</sup> took an interest in other cultures,<sup>20</sup> and read widely. Some had been members of local scientific societies, and others prioritized artistic pursuits.<sup>21</sup> All, however, had a vested interest in self-improvement and community betterment, so when, on a brisk November day in 1896, a member raised the possibility of reaching out to a member of the Wisconsin State Library Commission, a letter was quickly sent.<sup>22</sup> Although the response stated that the representative would have to meet with them at a later date, the women of the Monday Night Club were not discouraged. Miss Lutie Stearns would eventually attend a meeting two years later in November of 1898, at which time the topic of the library was raised and, at last, began to progress. After another year of waiting, a meeting was held at the courthouse to urge the appointment of a library board.<sup>23</sup> The motion passed, with nine members being elected to the board—several of whom were members of one of the two women’s clubs.<sup>24</sup>

Once the board was established, the members quickly began the process of fundraising for the library. One pertinent example of this fundraising lies in a rummage sale put on by the Monday Night Club and select elected officers on November first, third, and fourth which raised \$100.74. The committee elected to oversee the sale voted to give the money to the library board. Throughout 1899, there are notes in the Woman’s Club’s meeting minutes about small donations, either in the form of currency or books for the collection.<sup>25</sup> The Monday Night Club, in November of that same year, noted their involvement with Miss Stearns, saying that she “was

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<sup>18</sup> “Monday Night Club Register,” 21 January 1907 to 12 May 1913, Held in Monday Night Club exhibit at the Waupaca Historical Society, 321 S. Main Street, Waupaca, Wisconsin. 89

<sup>19</sup> “Monday Night Club Register,” 20, 89

<sup>20</sup> “Monday Night Club Register,” 115

<sup>21</sup> “Monday Night Club Register,” 115

<sup>22</sup> Monday Night Club Records, Held in Monday Night Club exhibit at the Waupaca Historical Society, 321 S. Main Street, Waupaca, Wisconsin. Entry dated 9 November 1896

<sup>23</sup> Monday Night Club Records, Entry dated 14 November 1899

<sup>24</sup> More focus is placed on the Monday Night Club within this research purely by virtue of the preservation and abundance of their papers. This priority is not because of greater importance, but, rather, greater available records.

<sup>25</sup> Marie App. *History of the Waupaca Area Public Library*. Amherst Junction: Signature Press, 2000. 6

with the ladies . . . preparing the library for readiness.”<sup>26</sup> The Woman’s Club took the most active role early on in the establishment of the library itself, with the Monday Night Club joining in popularizing and providing resources for the library, as well as setting rules and regulations for its function. The first iteration of the Waupaca Free Public Library was not the grand Carnegie structure it came to be, with a brick fireplace near which people read and conversed, sharing stories and discussing current events. It was a modest room over the Post Office, provided to the board rent-free, which had a collection of 759 books total.<sup>27</sup> The secretary at the time commented that “the use of . . . books, has this year far exceeded any former year, which should be proof to all that our library has become a large factor in the educational work of our city—and as such ought to [earn] the support of the council as well as of all our citizens.”<sup>28</sup> That first library would lead to one of the first related examples of municipal housekeeping and its way of giving women a voice over local politics.

On June 19, 1900, the Woman’s Club came before the Waupaca City Council to seek the implementation of a new property tax to fund the Free Public Library. These funds were granted and, as a result, the library’s services and collections expanded. A Woman’s Club went before the government of a small town, asking to *tax the residents* for the upkeep of a library that was contained within one room, and their request was granted. That alone stands as proof of the library’s value to the community and, equally, the power granted to the women who created it.

Later, in 1912, when the Library Board came forward seeking permission to solicit a grant from the Carnegie foundation, they were refused because of taxes on the city. The city argued that they were already burdened with a number of taxes, and did not wish to add another

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<sup>26</sup> Monday Night Club Records, 1

<sup>27</sup> App, 6, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Monday Night Club Records, 5

to that count. Another tax would be necessary if the Carnegie grant was given, as the application required a pledge from the municipality for annual support via “an annual levy . . . upon the taxable property of said community,”<sup>29</sup> as well as designated land to build upon. The Library Board which, as mentioned previously, was largely composed of members of women’s clubs and organizations, did not accept this verdict lying down. They asked that the fate of the grant application be put to a referendum and, come 1913, the community spoke with their ballots—Waupaca would have its Carnegie Library. When construction was completed in 1914, the community celebrated. Grants like those Carnegie offered provided a truly lifechanging amount of money, and all of it would be going toward the self-improvement the Women’s Club treasured. Their books and records would no longer remain in a single room, sheltered and illuminated only through the charity of the Post Office and Electric Company.<sup>30</sup> Soon, they would have a building all their own—One that contrasted the city’s other structures, with large windows that ensured that the books, and the women who studied them with single-minded determination, would never be forced back into the shadows again.

The Monday Night Club was not idle between 1902 and 1914. Far from it—The minutes from their meetings showcase heavy involvement in the library’s collections, setting rules and fundraising for its expansion. They noted the happenings of the board and determined the rules of loaning materials.<sup>31</sup> They made special allowances for teachers, as well, emphasizing their encouragement of education of all sorts. The Monday Night Club decreed that “the rules of the board relating to the length of time a book may be kept without fine, and the number of cards that may be issued to one person, be waived in the case of schoolteachers drawing books for use

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<sup>29</sup> George S. Bobinski. “Carnegie Libraries: Their History and Impact on American Public Library Development.” *ALA Bulletin* 62, no. 11 (1968): 1361–67

<sup>30</sup> App, 6,7

<sup>31</sup> Monday Night Club Records, 14



of pupils in their grades and departments.” They also decided “that the librarian [would] be authorized to make and enforce rules and regulations governing the drawing of books by teachers for use in their classes.”<sup>32</sup> In the general interest of self-improvement, and due to previous involvement in the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle, the records of their discussions show heavy favor towards reference materials.<sup>33</sup>

The Monday Night Club’s membership turned their passion for nature into a first step into local political activism, planting elms throughout town and petitioning their senator about the enforcement of federal laws surrounding the treatment of migratory birds.<sup>34</sup> These women believed firmly in the process of self-improvement favored by activists of the time, collaborating through their work with the library and their independent meetings to become articulate and politically active individuals. Meetings often opened with a lesson on “oft mispronounced” words, something also noted in the pamphlets from similar clubs’ meetings.<sup>35</sup> These club meetings, often written about in local newspapers as interesting, comical, lighthearted parties,<sup>36</sup> had a very serious, studious undertone to their content, skirting the transgressive connotations of women’s education the same way that seminaries had begun doing years before. These women, while making rhymes that included every member’s name,<sup>37</sup> painting place cards,<sup>38</sup> and hosting picnics and socials schooled themselves in science and languages, educated themselves of the laws of the country they lived in, and managed to get some of their own issues not merely put on

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<sup>32</sup> Monday Night Club Records, 14

<sup>33</sup> Attention to the location, rotation, and loaning of reference books is liberally scattered throughout all of the Monday Night Club’s record books

<sup>34</sup> “Monday Night Club Register,” 24

<sup>35</sup> PCHS Small Collection List #181, “Portage County Women’s Clubs,” Nelis R. Kampenga University Archives, University of Wisconsin—Stevens Point.

<sup>36</sup> “Monday Night Club Register,” 89, 115, 178

<sup>37</sup> “Monday Night Club Register,” 20, 21

<sup>38</sup> “Monday Night Club Register,” 115

the agenda, but passed into law themselves. They allowed merriment and friendship to play out in the fore—sincere though it was—and kept learning and petitioning in the background.

This learning was not amateur, or hastily constructed—an entire year of study could be devoted to whatever the selected topic happened to be, consisting of 32 lessons and three of review, with each being carefully researched in both books and correspondence with individuals of authority on said topic.<sup>39</sup> On several occasions, Professors hired by the club came in to lecture on areas of particular interest, as was the case with Professor Hyar of the Stevens Point Normal School.<sup>40</sup> At a time when college was not an option, the members of these women's clubs found their own way into a form of higher education, and bettered their communities in the process.

In 1917, these same clubs that worked to improve the intellectual and cultural development of women and girls in the Waupaca area took on new challenges. Their penchant for inviting speakers took on more weight, welcoming one Miss Roche from the Industrial Commission of Wisconsin to speak on the rights of laborers, including women and children.<sup>41</sup> The club also exchanged communication with the Wisconsin Women's Suffrage Association and the Chicago Womens' Shelter.<sup>42</sup> The club's actions within the community reflected this increase in progressive focus. They campaigned for women's suffrage and prohibition, seeking out signatures actively throughout 1917 and 1918. Mentions of these efforts appear throughout the minutes from this time period, written in between pasted newspaper clippings and weeks of cancelled meetings due to the influenza epidemic.<sup>43</sup> Even in a time of considerable upheaval,

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<sup>39</sup> App 28, supported by the pamphlets contained in PCHS Small Collection List #181

<sup>40</sup> "Secretary's Minutes of the Women's Club of Waupaca," 1909-1913, Held in Monday Night Club exhibit at the Waupaca Historical Society, 321 S. Main Street, Waupaca, Wisconsin, 77

<sup>41</sup> "Record of Secretary—Monday Night Club," 26 March 1917 to 2 October 1922, Held in Monday Night Club exhibit at the Waupaca Historical Society, 321 S. Main Street, Waupaca, Wisconsin, 56, 121

<sup>42</sup> "Record of Secretary—Monday Night Club" (1917-1922) 52, 58, 138

<sup>43</sup> "Record of Secretary—Monday Night Club" (1917-1922) 56, 57, 65, 138

these women's clubs never stopped pursuing the education they prized, and even took a step further to advocate for it politically. This active role in politics and women's advancement was enabled and encouraged by all the educational and administrative work done by the club during the library's creation.

In curating a collection of books and then, rather than housing them in individuals' homes, seeking to build them a place of pride shared by the community, the Woman's Club of Waupaca and the Monday Night Club proved that their pursuit of education spanned beyond self-improvement and into the area at large. They allowed their other actions in the spheres of community improvement, including the planting of elms, the hosting of parties and gatherings, and heavy involvement with the surrounding schools and churches, to speak for themselves. If the clubs said that Waupaca needed a library, a library was needed. They proved its importance again and again, providing a meeting place, educational materials, skill-building classes, and a sense of community, hosting a collection of books and patrons that grew with every passing year. Part of their success was due to those structural subversions now referred to as municipal housekeeping, but the care and literary interest of the community certainly cannot be discounted.

Structures built under the Carnegie umbrella often garner focus only as far as the man who provided a portion of their funding. They are inspected and examined, blueprints and builders scrutinized with eagle-eyed intensity. These buildings, however, held far more significance than their floor plans could ever reveal. Carnegie's funding only helped to support an outgrowth of something already budding—something that, at its offset, was planted and nurtured by the women who deemed it valuable. The efforts of the members of Women's Clubs and Organizations to educate themselves in a country that deemed them inferior were what made

the public library possible. It was their thirst for knowledge, love of literature, and relentless pursuit of self-improvement that brought them to the books those libraries would hold.

With colleges inaccessible, seminaries limited, and a love of learning that would span entire lifetimes, there was a hole in the educational system that women's clubs and organizations campaigned to fill. They knew what they wanted and fought to realize it at every opportunity, not giving in even after years of delay and governmental discouragement. The actions of the Woman's Club of Waupaca and the Monday Night Club were preceded and echoed by similar accounts spanning across Wisconsin and the entire United States of America. Across years and counties, the records of their actions can be so alike they seem identical. These small actions, soft as a whisper and highly isolated in of themselves, created change and expansion to education that roared. For too long, the stories of the women behind the libraries were tucked away like the collections' earliest iterations—shuffled around in boxes or kept in dark rooms, with their locations and contents bearing more discussion than those who created them. It was only in recent years that the curtains were tied open, that boxes were pulled out of storage and displayed, and that those women who made their existence possible were finally illuminated with that gentle golden light of morning, their histories no longer confined to the shadows.

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