

Beals Memorial Library: a History

*Expanding imaginations
and opportunities begin
with access to a library.*

Research sources: “History of the Town of Winchendon” by Reverend A. P. Marvin (1868), and “Winchendon Years 1764 – 1964” by Lois Stevenson Greenwood (1970)



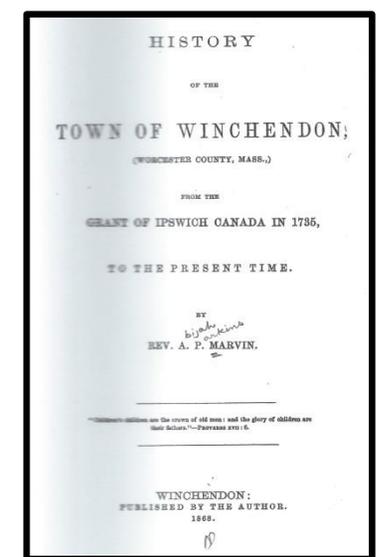
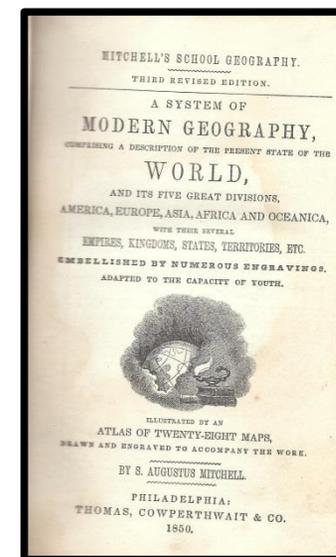
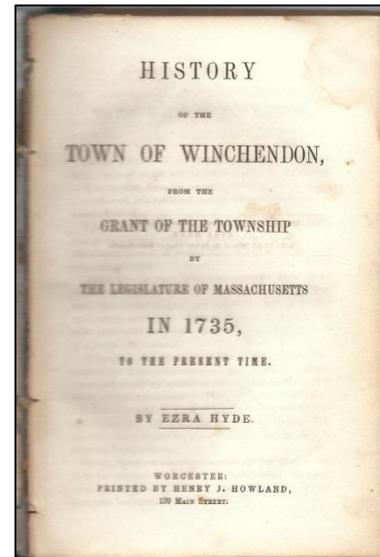
Early Collection of Books

In the late 1700's the first collection of books for circulation in Winchendon was kept at Old Centre by Deacon Joshua Smith and later by Mark Whitcomb.

Around 1810-1825 there was a collection of some 175 volumes kept in the home of Ephraim Murdock on Front Street.

Sometime between 1830 and 1835 another "library" was started and kept for many years under the care of Mr. Whitcomb. Although it contained between 200 and 300 volumes, after a period of usefulness it, like its predecessors, was sold at auction.

There were other collections in town during the 1800s such as small school district libraries, an agricultural library and Sunday school libraries. However, it wasn't until 1850 that the movement for a more permanent library would begin.



Beginnings of a More Permanent Library

The drive for a permanent library was ignited by a lecture on “Reading” given by Rev. A. P. Marvin on the evening of Dec. 6, 1850 in the hall of the Winchendon Academy. He closed his lecture calling for a library to provide “a fountain of improvement and of happiness; an inexhaustible spring of the purest, richest nutriment for the immortal minds of the youth of this generation, and of the many generations that are to come.”

At the close of the lecture it was proposed to organize a literary association, which was named the “Winchendon Scientific and Literary Association”.



The group raised \$300 by subscription to purchase books and bookcases. Over the years, the library was housed in various locations on Front and Central Streets.

In March, 1867, upon vote of the Literary Association, the library passed into possession of the Town of Winchendon. At this time the library contained about 1,500 volumes. The library was moved into the A. B. Smith block on Front Street and Mrs. Lucy Poland (left) was appointed the town’s first librarian. The wife of local businessman Mr. Wheeler Poland, she would serve as librarian for the next 10 years. She died in 1904 and is buried with her husband at the town’s Riverside Cemetery.

First Winchendon "Public Library" Opens in Smith Block in 1867



From right to left: post office, leather store, I. M. Murdock building, and A. B. Smith Block (Library)

Library Looking for a Home

Fire in 1876 burned part of the library in the Smith block and destroyed several hundred volumes. The library was moved to the new engine house (most recently the former police station on Pleasant Street). Some 10 years later, in 1887, the library moved to Town Hall (center of first floor pictured below right) and located in the room that is currently the Town Clerk's office with a Reading Room facing the street.

Because of overcrowding in the Town Hall, in 1891 a request was made at town meeting to appropriate \$10,000 for the building of a public library. The motion was defeated.

In 1901, trustees of Murdock Fund voted to offer former home of E. Murdock, Jr. (then the Unitarian parsonage) to the Town for a library. Townspeople voted to accept the offer, but church members were not in agreement and the offer was withdrawn.

In 1907 the Town bought a lot on the corner of Central and Summer Streets (current property of Clark Memorial YMCA) for \$4,000 to be used for a library.

The library remained in the overcrowded Town Hall until 1913.

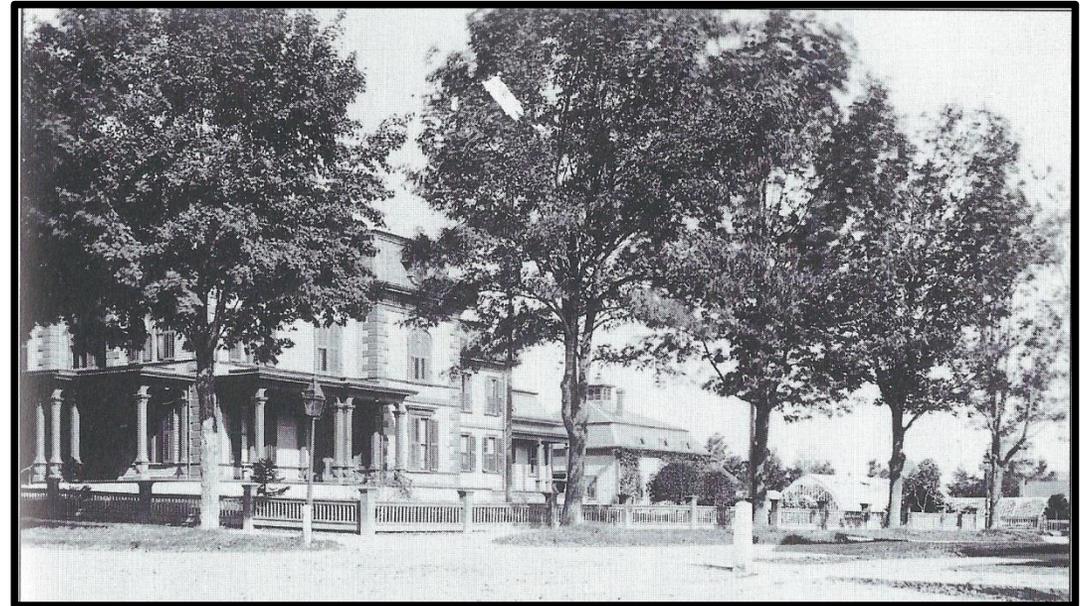


The Birth of Beals Memorial Library

In 1907, library trustees appealed to Andrew Carnegie for a grant. He offered \$12,500 for a new library building. It was voted at town meeting to ask Mr. Carnegie for \$25,000 for a more suitable building. He refused to increase the offer.

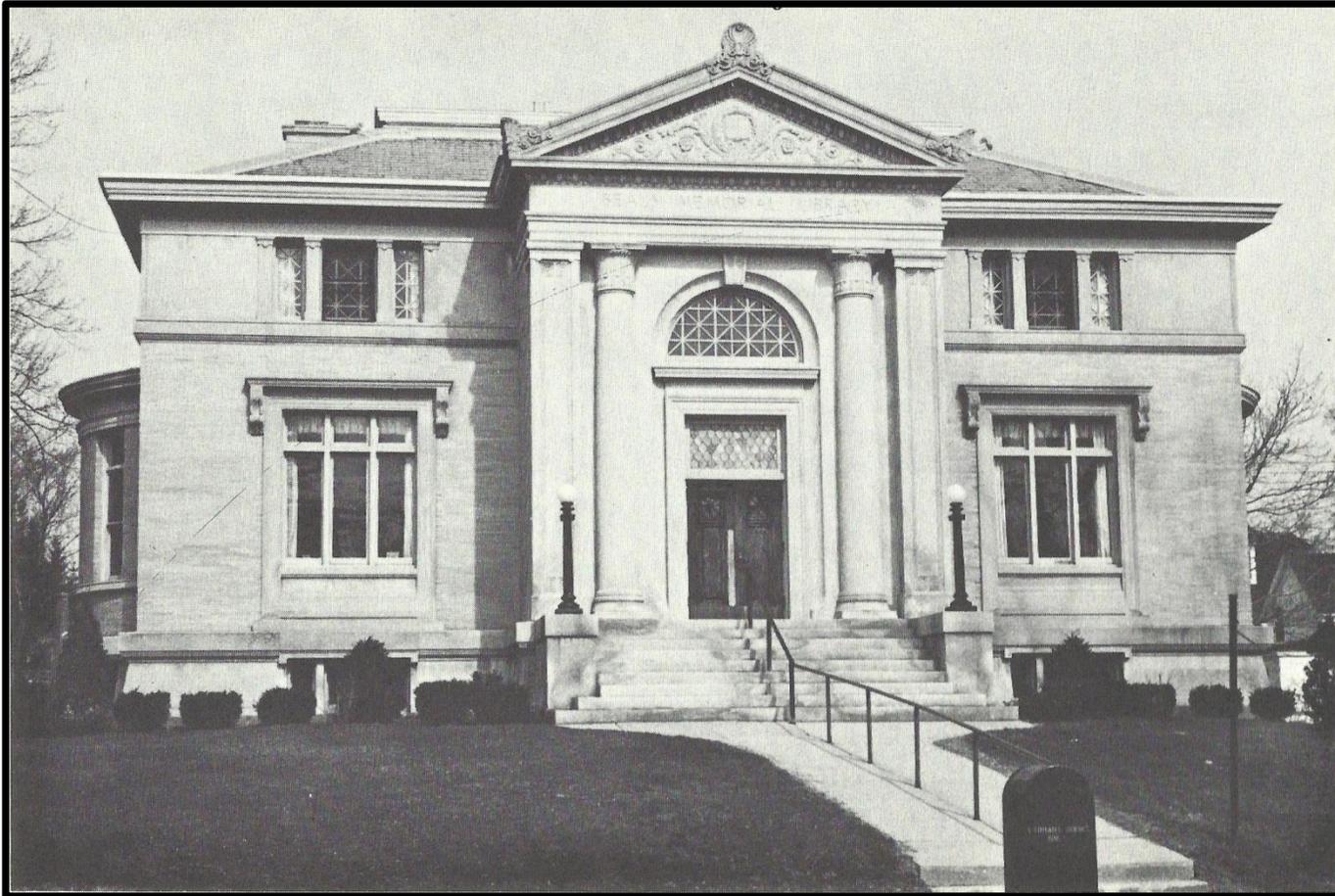
A Special town meeting was called on June 5, 1909, at which a letter from local businessman Mr. Charles L. Beals was read offering \$25,000 to the town for “a public library to be called the Beals Memorial Library in memory of my wife, Hattie M. Beals, and George L. Beals and family.” The offer was graciously accepted by the town.

At the 1910 town meeting, Mr. Beals offered to purchase land on Pleasant street at the former residence of E. Murdock, Jr. and, later, Unitarian parsonage for the library site. It was felt that the lot bought by the town in 1907 on the corner of Central and Summer Streets was not suitable – too much traffic and noise. The town accepted his offer and voted \$5,000 for the foundation of the new library and grading of the grounds. Later, in 1913, the town voted \$2,500 for furnishing the library.



Today - Legion Park on left; library to the right

Formal Dedication of the Beals Memorial Library



The Beals Memorial Library was dedicated on Tuesday, September 30, 1913, before a capacity audience at Town Hall. Following presentation of the library keys by the selectmen to the trustees and a series of speeches, a dedicatory prayer was offered on the steps of the new library.

The new building was 70 X 60 feet, made of Indiana limestone with granite trimmings, containing a reading room, children's room, reference room, stackroom, and auditorium, and mahogany finish throughout. It housed 10,850 books.

Total cost of the library was \$32,300.

Sadly, Mr. Charles L. Beals would never see the result of his generosity – he died March 12, 1911

In 1914, George C. Beals gave a Chickering grand piano (right) for the library's auditorium in memory of his mother. The piano remains in the auditorium and is still used today.

For many years, the library served as home for the Winchendon Women's Club for meetings and activities. The club was the first organization to meet in the new library on October 3, 1913.

In 1914, the front basement of the library was used as the Historical Room during observance of the town's 150th anniversary.

Established in 1930, the Winchendon Historical Society (now the Winchendon History & Cultural Center on Front Street) used the library for many years for meetings and exhibits.

In 1959, the Friends of Beals Memorial Library was organized "to further the influence and underline the importance of the Beals Memorial Library..." They are still providing valued support today.

The longest serving librarian in town's history was Julia (White) Cardinal who held the position from 1979 to 2015.



Historic Library Now Accessible to All

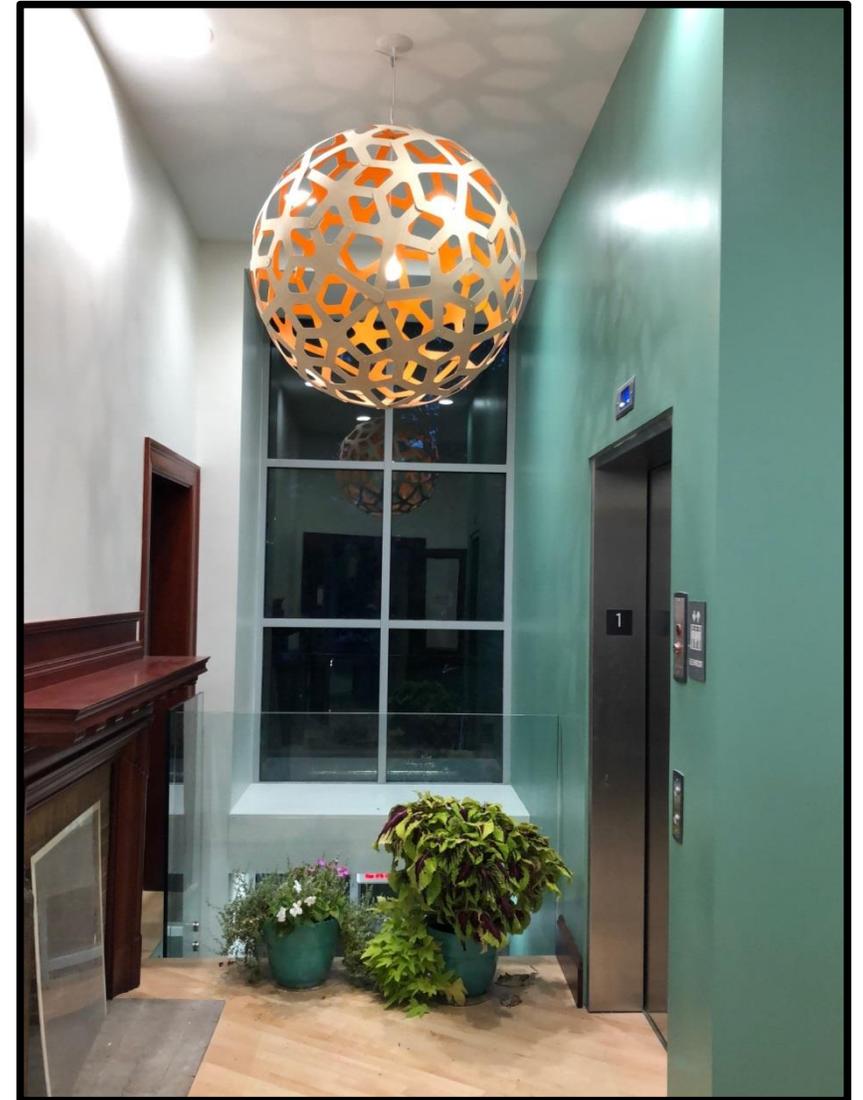
Plans to make the library fully accessible started in the late 1990s as a full renovation and expansion, including two story addition, elevator, new children's room and parking lot; all ADA compliant.

Over the years the scope of the project was scaled back due to lack of funds. The final project became a new sidewalk level entrance with elevator to all floors, stairway and two bathrooms; all ADA compliant.

Thanks to the generosity of the Citizens of Winchendon, Bertha S. Churchill Trust, Robinson-Broadhurst Foundation, Vena Field Fund, Esther Meyer Fund, Louis & Mable Oliva Fund, Beals Family, and Morton E. Converse Fund, a construction contract was signed on February 28, 2017 to begin work on the \$1.5 million project.

A groundbreaking ceremony was held on the evening of June 27, 2017.

With the grand opening on Saturday, October 20, 2018, the Beals Memorial Library truly became a “public library” – now accessible to ALL the people of Winchendon. Mr. Beals would be pleased.



With Deepest Appreciation & Thanks

Again, we would like to recognize the generosity of the following: Citizens of Winchendon, Bertha S. Churchill Trust, Robinson-Broadhurst Foundation, Vena Field Fund, Esther Meyer Fund, Louis & Mable Oliva Fund, the Beals Family, and Morton E. Converse Fund. Your financial support made the elevator and entranceway a reality.

Our architects David Pollak and Julia Patten of ABACUS (Architects + Planners) who had a vision and saw it to the finish line, and were there for us “whenever” we needed them. You always had the historical integrity of the building in the forefront – for which we are forever grateful. Thanks to the many workers with P&S Construction for taking the architects’ vision and bringing it to life.

Finally, thanks to our library patrons who put up with the dust and confusion these many months. Without each of you, this effort would have been in vain. You give the library purpose and life. We thank you.

“How greatly the value of the library is enhanced by the Charles L. Beals building will be made more and more apparent in the coming years. We best honor the memory of the donor by a wise and constant use of the gift bestowed.” (Dedication Speech on September 30, 1913)