

The History of the Elisha D. Smith Menasha Public Library

1884 - 2021

1884

The Library Association of Menasha formed with 60 subscribers, headed by Elisha D. Smith with support from Lucy Lee Pleasants. They used a room in the Menasha High School, which coincidentally stood where the library stands today.

1896

The first meeting of the Menasha Library Association board of directors was held on April 18 in the parlor of the National Hotel. The first business of order was to elect officers and directors. It was decided to rent a space for a library.

In May, a purchasing committee was authorized to select and purchase \$1,000 worth of books for the rooms leased on the second floor of the Adam Tuchscherer building on the northwest corner of Chute and Milwaukee Streets. Mr. Tuchscherer agreed to provide free rent until September. Rent was \$75 per year, with heat and one electric light in each of the two rooms furnished.

In August, Miss Lucy Lee Pleasants is appointed the librarian. A large number of the books purchased for the library are in German and Polish. At this point, the library still operated as a subscription library.

1897

Library trustees voted on March 22 to transfer all of the library's assets to the city with the condition that the city accept, establish, and maintain the library as a free public library according to law. The city agreed to levy a tax to maintain the library.

By July 12, the library was no longer a subscription library; it was known as the Free Public Library and Reading Rooms of Menasha. The library had an inventory of 1,458 volumes and pamphlets. The Elected Board of Trustees officers were President E. D. Smith, Vice-President F. D. Lake, and Secretary J. L. Fieweger.

On September 1, E. D. Smith announced that he would supply a \$25,000 gift to the library to "invest in a building and the furnishing of the same . . . with \$10,000 to be placed as an endowment fund when the building is completed". Construction eventually cost \$17,000, but Mr. Smith established a \$10,000 endowment fund.

1898

On Friday, March 18 the cornerstone of the new library on Mill and Water Streets was placed by Mowry, Margaret, Carlton, and Julia Smith – grandchildren of E. D. Smith.

The new Free Public Library of Menasha opened on October 21. An afternoon dedication was held in the auditorium of the new library, and an evening celebration was held at the Germania Opera House. Addresses were made by Samuel Plantz, president of Lawrence University, Dr. E. H. Merrell of Ripon College, F. A. Hutchins, secretary of the state library commission of Madison, Charles K. Adams, president of the University of Wisconsin, Reverend H. A. Miner of Madison, and E. D. Smith who said that he wanted "our library to be a constant and increasing benefit to our community". Mr. Smith relished in hearing users of the library speak with pride of "our library", which included a system of fifteen traveling libraries with fifty volumes each to provide library service to those residing outside of downtown Menasha. One traveling library has been preserved and is located outside of the present administrative offices.

In November juvenile books were added to the library. Some people complained that the library was so overrun by children that there was no place to sit.

1899

Elisha D. Smith passed away and a portrait of Mr. Smith was accepted and paid for by the board of trustees. The work was done by A. Y. VanWagner. The portrait hangs above the library's fireplace today.

1902	A Library Visiting Committee was appointed to invite people to visit and use the library.
1904	The Ladies of the Federated Clubs were granted permission to charge admission for lectures, concerts, or other entertainments. They used the money to purchase a piano for the library's auditorium, gifting it to the board of trustees. This piano is still owned by the library today.
1909	A telephone was installed in the library.
1931	A children's room was added onto the building at a cost of \$20,000. It is decided to call the room the Lucy Lee Pleasants Memorial Room. A portrait of Miss Pleasants was given to the library by her family to be hung in a conspicuous place in the room after her death in 1925. This portrait hangs in the current Children's Room, close to the story room.
1933	Juvenile delinquency "rears its ugly head" and the board arranged for a guard with police powers to be on duty each evening from 7:00 to 9:00.
1936	This was the year of the Menasha High School fire. All books checked out to students who had them at school were written off without fault to the borrowers. Rooms of the library not in constant use were turned into school rooms.
1946	It was established that the name of the library will henceforth be the Elisha D. Smith Public Library.
1952	The library board purchased a new Radio-Phonograph combination and a movie projector was installed.
1955	A polio epidemic disrupted operation of the library.
1956	The library held a celebration of the 60th anniversary of the first meeting of the Menasha Library Board of Trustees on April 15.
1965	The decision is made to build a new library on Racine Street at site of the high school that had burned down in 1936. In 1965 it was the site of the Racine Street Park.
1969	The new library opened on August 6. Children lined up the length of the children's room to check out books. Circulation for the day was 1,818. Dedication and open house ceremonies were held on September 14. The meeting room in the basement was designated as the Company E Room, dedicated to the memory of 170 Menasha men who comprised the entire Company E unit that fought in France in World War I. The children's room was designated the Lucy Lee Pleasants Children's Library. The new 28,000 square foot library was built at a cost of \$592,000.

1980

The library became a member of the Winnefox Library System.

1988

The library was named Wisconsin Library Association Library of the Year.

1996

The library celebrated its 100th anniversary on November 17.

2004

Renovation of the 46,000 square foot library was completed at a cost of \$4.5 million, with slightly more than \$1 million coming from private donations. A grand opening celebration occurred on January 31, 2004.

2008

The library is named Wisconsin Library Association Library of the Year for the second time.

2018

Library Board Chairman James C. Englebert is named Trustee of the Year by the Wisconsin Library Association.

2020

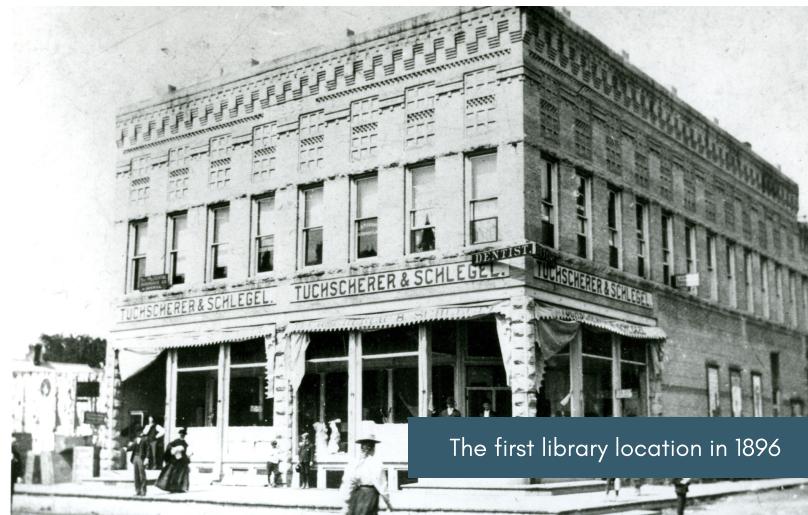
The coronavirus pandemic disrupted operation of the library.

2021

The library celebrates its 125th anniversary.



Current library building in 2021



The first library location in 1896

