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## Historical overview of public library development in the English-speaking Caribbean

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### Abstract:

*The early advocates for public libraries in the Caribbean felt that these institutions were necessary to the development of the people in this region. It took a great deal of effort for these libraries to become institutions with everyone having the right to of access. Andrew Carnegie stipulated that the libraries he financed should be free and accessible to all. This paper will review the emergence of these libraries in the English-speaking Caribbean with an emphasis on the Carnegie libraries in Barbados, St. Lucia and Dominica.*

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### The Caribbean

The islands of the Caribbean stretch in an arc from the southernmost United States all the way to the northern tip of South America as seen in the figure below. The entire area is called the Greater and Lesser Antilles. The Greater Antilles are the islands of Cuba, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Haiti and the Dominican Republic and the Lesser Antilles islands are comprised of the Leeward Islands, those islands in the northernmost part of the arc and the Windward Islands, the islands in the southernmost part. The Greater Antilles are made up of continental rock, part of the North American geology while the islands in the Lesser Antilles are made up of volcanic and coral stone.

These islands are linked in their geological make-up and their common history which included colonial domination for over two hundred years by the various European powers. The islands of Barbados, St. Lucia and Dominica and are all part of the English-speaking Caribbean.



Source: caribbeandiving.com

## Early Library Development in the Caribbean

Libraries were in the Caribbean from as early as the sixteenth century. According to Joseph A. Boromé, “libraries first appeared in the Caribbean with the flow of the Spaniards to the New World in the wake of Columbus’s voyages.” (Boromé 200). During further colonial expansion into the region during the sixteenth century, the clergy, who accompanied the explorers, took volumes of works with them and accumulated private collections in these colonies. For example, one of the earliest organised libraries was started by the Dominicans in their convent in Puerto Rico in 1523. Another was that of Bishop Balbuena who had a substantial library in San Juan which was later destroyed by the Dutch in 1625 when they attacked the city. (Lewis, 91).

As Spanish influence declined in the region, the British increased their thrust into the Caribbean and they too brought their books with them. In 1700, General Codrington, Governor of the Leeward islands at the time “possessed a large library of books on all kinds of subjects.” (Lewis, 91). An Anglican clergyman, Thomas Bray, founder of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, which was later called the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, is credited as the person who first agitated for the establishment of libraries in the British colonies around 1690. He urged the British settlers to start free circulating libraries for the gentry and especially ministers residing there. Many of the English colonies benefitted from Reverend Bray’s efforts.

The history of libraries, particularly in the United States and Great Britain, during the 18th and much of 19th centuries was dominated by subscription libraries. (Loomis, 1994). He distinguishes three types of subscription libraries - book clubs or societies, private

subscription libraries, and commercial circulating libraries. Book clubs were essentially discussion groups and did not maintain permanent collections. Private subscription libraries were limited to affluent members of the society. On the other hand, commercial circulating libraries were profit-seeking enterprises catering to those in the society who could afford to pay the fees required to use these libraries. Many of these libraries were scattered across the Caribbean.

In Barbados, for example, a Literary Society was set up in 1777; a Library Association was founded on February the 10<sup>th</sup> 1814, and incorporated under the name of the President and Members of the Library Association on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1821; around 1825 a Clerical Library was established for the clergy during Bishop Coleridge's tenure (1824-1842) and a library for the garrison of St. Ann's, for the use of officers stationed there. (Schomburgh, 132-33).

In Dominica, a Literacy Society was set up in 1821 under Jean Baptiste Louis, a coloured doctor, then the Roseau Juvenile Literacy Association was set up in 1828, by some young men engaged in the mercantile trade; in 1832 the Dominica Public Circulating Library was established and headed by Charles Augustus Fillian; in 1847, the Dominica Reading Room and Library was set up and in August 1849, The Young Men's Literary Association was organised. In 1872, the *Dominican* Newspaper began to lobby Government to take over the Reading Room and maintain it as a public library.

In St. Lucia, according to Henry Breen in his *1844 History of St. Lucia*, "a reading room was established in 1830 and continued in existence for about a year. A circulating library was instituted in 1836, and also lasted a year. An attempt to get up a reading room was again made in 1839 and again in 1842, but met with no better success. Indeed, reading is altogether at a sad discount. (Breen, 273). Further attempts were made in 1847. (Library Report 1958).

By 1840 in the colonies, both emancipation and apprenticeship had come to an end. During this era, advocates were agitating for free public libraries and the movement gained momentum. By 1847 several of the colonies passed legislation to establish public libraries. In July, the Act to establish a public library was passed in Grenada; St. Lucia in June and in October, Barbados followed. Acts for St. Vincent and the Grenadines came much later in 1893. When the laws came into effect, existing libraries voluntarily handed over their books to the agencies concerned. It must be noted that the first Public Libraries Act was passed in Britain in 1850, three years after the legislation was passed in some of their colonies.

In the late 1800's early 1900's, a man who was devoted to the cause of free access to information i.e. public libraries, came to the assistance of those in the colonies who were also advocating for this change. His name was Andrew Carnegie.

### **The Carnegie Connection**

In the late 1800's and early 1900's, the wealthy philanthropist, Andrew Carnegie decided to donate money for the building of public libraries. Local legislators of towns and cities across the United States of America, and the United Kingdom and a few of their colonies sent requests for funds to build public libraries. Some of the colonies receiving monies from the Carnegie Corporation to build public libraries were Barbados 1903, St.

Lucia 1916, Dominica 1905, St. Vincent 1906, Trinidad 1914 and Guyana(formerly Demerara) 1906.

### **The Carnegie Free Library – Barbados**

After the act to establish the public library in Barbados was passed in 1847, the government needed to find a building. After using rental properties at Codd's House, in Bridgetown, the library was moved to the house of Mr. William. H. Austin in Bolton Lane and remained there until a permanent home was found in the East Wing of the Public Buildings in 1874. (National Library Service).

Sir Frederic Hodgson, Governor of Barbados (1900-1904), was influential in helping to establish a free public library in Barbados.

Hodgson wrote to Mr. Carnegie in 1903 and requested funds to build the library. He received a positive response. He was granted the funds with two stipulations - the library should be free to all who wanted to use it and it should be maintained by the government.

The library was officially opened on Friday, 26 January 1906, by Sir Gilbert Carter, the Governor at the time and was the first Carnegie library to be erected in the British West Indies.

### **The Carnegie Free Library – St. Lucia**

The road to the erection of the Carnegie library in St Lucia was somewhat rockier in St. Lucia. Records indicate that as early as 1904, the Carnegie Trust had offered £2,500 to the library service for the erection of a building. The funds were actually appropriated on May 15, 1916. However, the decision of where to build the library took several years. On May 15, 1923 the cornerstone of the Library was laid by Mrs. Davidson- Houston, wife of Administrator Lieutenant Colonel W. B. Davidson-Houston. After a long and contentious period, the library was finally completed in June 1924 and opened by Mrs. Davidson-Houston before a distinguished group of citizens and government officials on Monday December 1, 1924. Its development was impeded in 1927 and 1948 due to the fires that took place in the town of Castries. The library was renamed the Central Library of St. Lucia in 1958.

### **The Carnegie Free Library – Dominica**

Dominica also struggled to develop their public library system and after the many years to establish a truly free library, the British colonial administrator Henry Hesketh Bell submitted an application to Carnegie for funds to construct a public library in 1904. Carnegie provided £1,500 for Dominica's first public library which was designed by Bell himself. The building was completed in 1907 and formally opened on May 11, that same year.

### **Mid twentieth century Developments**

Having given these funds, the Carnegie Corporation had an interest in the development of these libraries and in 1933, they commissioned Ernest Savage, a librarian of the Edinburgh Public Library, to report on the state of library development and progress of the libraries in Bermuda, Bahamas, British West Indies, British Guiana, British Honduras,

Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Among some of his findings was the lack of professional literature and no cooperative ventures among libraries. Recommendations included the creation of a regional free library systems to serve the cultural and vocational needs of the people; creation of financial support from government agencies; recruitment of trained librarians; acquisition of library related literature and library manuals; acquisition of up-to-date reference and library manuals; admission of all libraries as one service for the whole region or a group of librarians united as a service within existing government frameworks.

As a result of the Savage report, the Carnegie Corporation allocated seventy thousand dollars for the development of libraries in the Caribbean. This resulted in the Central Library Scheme for the Eastern Caribbean. The aims of the scheme were to:

- 1) provide a free library service
- 2) maintain approved library standards
- 3) provide rural extensions so that the entire island could have access to library facilities, and
- 4) provide a children's service

After the end of the grant, the Eastern Caribbean Regional Library (ECRL) was to be established in Trinidad & Tobago and headed by Dr. Helen Gordon Stewart. ECRL operated from 1941-1958 and established a library service for the whole of Trinidad and Tobago. In 1948, ECRL broadened its scope and the ECRL School of Librarianship was created. This program was officially endorsed by the British Library Association and consisted of a correspondence course followed by three months of lectures and in-service training.

By the 1960's a pattern of library service emerged in the countries of the Eastern Caribbean. The design consisted of a central public library; library advisory boards; a system of deposit stations and the use of bookmobiles to reach isolated areas.

Alma Jordan in her 1964 study of *Public Libraries in the British Caribbean* said that despite the early start of public libraries and the emergence of a regional service, library development in the islands had failed to keep pace with trends abroad as a result of severe economic limitations. (Jordan, 144). Nearly fifty years later, her statement is still applicable. However, there is evidence that in addition to the lack of funds, there is also a lack of public agitation, internal advocacy and support from the various governments.

## **Current Developments**

### **Barbados**

Over the years, the Carnegie library had received little maintenance and the building deteriorated. The structure, now over one hundred years old, was proving to be inadequate for a modern society. In August 2006, the doors of the Carnegie library were closed to the public.

The library remained closed for two years while the government tried to find a suitable location. In September 2008, the National Library Service reopened in Independence Square, Bridgetown.

At the opening, the Minister of Culture, Mr. Steve Blackett, promised that the Carnegie Public Library would be refurbished and reopened by the end of the current administration's first term in office. He pledged government's commitment to Carnegie's

legacy. He promised that both the building's functional use as a library, as well as the historical and architectural integrity of the structure, would be preserved. At the time, he said that the building would be included among those put forward in the nomination dossier seeking to have historic Bridgetown and the Garrison designated by UNESCO as a world heritage site.

In January 2010 a local newspaper reported on a statement from the minister who said that, due to the current economic situation prevailing in the country, the Carnegie Free public library could not be restored in the immediate future. He said he hoped it could be addressed in the future.

Despite the many setbacks, the library service continues to try to meet the needs of the community as they host programs for children and adults throughout the year.

Recent reports indicate that there has been an increase in readership since the move to Independence Square.

### **St. Lucia**

In 1979, with a grant from the World Development, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDS) and the Manitoba Association, two additional rooms were added to the original structure – the adult reading and circulation department. In 1994, renovations were made to the building which resulted in another floor which now houses the administration, technical services and staff lunch room.

In March 2010 a fire in the conference room caused some damage to the walls, computer terminals, television sets and standing fans. Fortunately, there was no major damage to the building.

A visit to the St. Lucia National Library in May 2011 showed additional construction to the building. The ceiling in the Reference Department and windows in the building had been repaired. An interview with the Director revealed plans to rewire the building in an effort to accommodate air conditioning in the entire building. She also noted that in addition to these changes, there were plans to choose an integrated library system to automate the collection. Funds were being sought from the Taiwanese government and the Social Development Fund. The Director also said that there were some staffing improvements taking place. Four staff members were taking the program at Aberystwyth University in the United Kingdom. and one member of staff was working on attaining a Masters degree also at the same university.

### **Dominica**

Over the years, advocates for the improvement of Dominica's Carnegie Library in Roseau, have spoken about the state of the building. Lennox Honychurch noted in a 2004 article that the library had had nothing of significance done to it since it opened in 1905.

In an interview on May 4, 2011 the Librarian at the Roseau Public Library, said that there had been 'talk' of a new library but she was unaware of any concrete plans to improve the physical state of the library. She said however, that the library was at the forefront of several outreach initiatives. For example there is a preschool program for young children in

June; in February Pet Day was launched this year; during Library Week in April, the library staff highlighted several types of programs including visits to prisons. During the summer break, there are programs for children between the ages of five and thirteen.

### **Conclusion**

Public libraries in the English-speaking Caribbean are facing the same challenges as those in other islands as well as first world countries. Cutbacks in funds, rate of technology, building standards, climate and refurbishment costs all contribute to their dire state.

However, even as libraries face these many challenges, the evidence shows that librarians continue to work tirelessly to promote their services to the community they serve.

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