

Oregon Territorial Library

By Jim Schepcke

The Oregon Territorial Library was the first publicly funded library in Oregon. It was created by the U.S. Congress under the same act that established the Oregon Territory in 1848. Beginning with the Wisconsin Territory in 1836, Congress had made a practice of appropriating funds so that new territories could have a basic collection of state statutes and other law books to assist territorial governors and legislators in creating new laws.

The request for funding a territorial library was made by Jessy Quinn Thornton, a delegate sent by the Provisional Government in 1848 with a memorial to Congress requesting territorial status. The memorial stated: "Your memorialist prays that the sum of \$10,000 be appropriated, to be expended in the purchase of a library, to be kept at the seat of government for the use of the governor, secretary, legislature, judges, marshal district attorney, and other such persons and under such regulations as may be prescribed by law." The Congress appropriated only half the sum requested, apparently disregarding the argument made in the memorial that a larger amount was needed because "the inhabitable part of the Territory is so remote from the seat of the national government, and . . . access cannot be had to any books or libraries."

Aaron E. Waite was appointed as the first librarian in 1848. He served for two years and later became chief justice of the Oregon Supreme Court. In 1849, Territorial Governor Joseph Lane made the initial purchase of books in New York City; three years later, his successor John Gaines spent the remaining \$3,000 on books and maps. The purchases were sent to Oregon City, where the library was located until the state capitol moved to Salem in 1852. By then, the library collection had grown to encompass more than law books and government documents and included such works as *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and *Darwin's Voyages*. By 1854, the library had accumulated 1,735 books.

Tragically, the library was consumed in the state capitol fire that occurred in December 1855, and only a few books that were in circulation survived. In 1856, the legislature requested \$20,000 from Congress to replace the Territorial Library collection, but Congress appropriated only \$500.

When Oregon achieved statehood in 1859, the Territorial Library became the State Library and the librarian became the state librarian. The first state librarian, B.F. Bonham, reported in 1860 that the collection had grown to include 1,027 volumes and five newspaper subscriptions.

Today's State of Oregon Law Library in the Supreme Court Building in Salem is the direct descendant of the Territorial Library and the original State Library. (Today's State Library of Oregon was founded as the Oregon Library Commission in 1905 and has had two name changes, most recently in 2017.) Like the Territorial Library, the Law Library has the primary mission of providing legal information and research to the judicial branch of state government, the Justice Department, and state agencies.

Sources

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