

A Brief History of the Halton Hills Public Library

In the Beginning

The Halton Hills Public Library has been providing library services to the community for more than a century. The Georgetown Public Library was founded in 1895. Three years later, the Acton Public Library opened its doors. The two libraries operated in their own communities until 1974, when they merged and became the Halton Hills Public Library. Since then, the library has grown not only in size and membership but also in technological advancements, programs and in its impact on the community through a wide array of programs and services. Major facility improvements occurred in 2010 – 2012 with the construction of a new Acton branch and with the current construction of a renewed and expanded Georgetown Branch. Much more than simply a cultural institution, the library has become a vital community resource for everyone.

Through the middle of the nineteenth century, "school promoters" convinced government that the formal education of the province's youth was a major priority, making attendance compulsory for an increasingly broad range of age groups. Approved textbooks were at the core of education, but a broader range of books was approved for school "libraries" (usually little more than a couple of shelves in the corner of the single classroom.) Under certain conditions the materials could be made available to others in the school district.

The Acton Library Begins

By 1883 the Board of Education for Acton voted to transfer its collection from the overcrowded public school to the new Town Hall, where on Monday evening at 7:00 the public could go and select from nearly 1400 items. Practically the first order of business at the founding meeting of the Acton Free Library Board, 1 April 1898, was to accept the collection from the Acton Public School Board.

The Georgetown Library Begins

The Georgetown collection sprang from a related tradition--that of the Mechanic's Institutes. These were associations whose principal purpose was to encourage those who had finished school, particularly members of the working class, to continue their education. Evening classes and special lectures were a significant part of the program of the Mechanic's Institutes, along with a library and a reading room stocked with newspapers and magazines.

The number of Institutes in Ontario had grown substantially since the first two were formed in 1835, but a large number were formed after 1877, when the provincial government, through the Department of Education, began matching local dollars raised. Formed with considerable

enthusiasm in the spring of 1880, the Georgetown Mechanic's Institute's collection grew rapidly for about three years and slowly, if at all, for the next dozen. The number of active members in a community of about 1,500 slid from more than 100 down to between 60 and 70.

Occasionally helped out by a grant of \$25 or \$40 (and free rent) from the village council, the Georgetown Mechanic's Institute frequently failed to qualify for any money from the province. Annual membership fees of a dollar were a day's wages for the working men the Institute was supposed to benefit. By 1895 new provincial legislation encouraged its directors to turn the whole collection (nearly 1,300 volumes) over to the village on the condition that access to it be free for all residents of the village.

The Birth of a Free Public Library and Library Boards

In charge of the newly created free public libraries were the newly appointed public library boards. In both communities, board members included a representative of Council. In Acton this included the irrepressible H.P. Moore, editor and owner of the Acton Free Press, John Cameron, a local builder, and the Presbyterian, Anglican and Methodist ministers.

The Life of a Victorian Librarian

So long as the collection consisted of only a couple of thousand titles and library business was only done on two or three nights of the week, only one staff person, typically a young woman, was hired. Acton's first public librarian was Miss Ettie Laird, a girl of 16 who also worked at the post office, where among other things she did telegraphy.

For \$40 a year she was to enforce all rules, keep the books in systematic order, keep a record of membership, notify delinquents, keep the books, shelves, etc., carefully dusted, be courteous at all times to members, report to the board any discourtesy or misconduct on the part of those who visit the library, and the infamous "such other duties as the board might require". Wages were raised to \$50 in 1901, \$90 in 1913 and \$120 by 1918. These wages brought Acton in closer line with Georgetown where Miss Alberta Glass was hired in 1899 for \$100 a year.

Rules of the Acton Library

The rules of the Acton Library were fairly simple. You had to be 14, known to the librarian or vouched for by a responsible citizen. A library card cost five cents, a copy of the printed catalogue another ten. The Dewey Decimal system would not arrive until 1915, and a card catalogue well after that. In 1924 the Board was still printing supplementary catalogues after its annual Fall buying trip to Toronto. Members could borrow one book at a time; overdue fines after two weeks were charged at the rate of five cents a day. There were additional fines for turning down the leaves, marking or defacing books. Noise and loud conversation were forbidden as was smoking.

Hours of Operation in the Early Days

The Acton Library was open 7:00 to 8:30 p.m. on Monday, Wednesday and Saturdays. A switch to Friday nights, and the occasional experiments with afternoon and Saturday hours were the only tinkering with hours before the first purpose-built Acton Library opened in 1967. From the beginning, Georgetown's hours were substantially longer: 12:30 to 5:30 each afternoon and 6:30 to 8:00 (summer) or 9:00 (winters).

The Georgetown Move to Knox Presbyterian

Both collections continued to be housed in the respective Town Halls. In Georgetown hope sprang eternal that the Carnegie estate, which had been so generous with other public libraries across North America, could be persuaded to donate towards a new building. They were turned down in 1903 and again in 1910.

The solution presented itself in 1912, when the members of the local Congregational Church, anticipating the union of the Congregational Church with those of the Methodists and Presbyterians, decided to move next door to Knox Presbyterian. The founding president of the Georgetown Mechanics Institute, and leading local industrialist, John R. Barber, with the other trustees of the Congregational Church deeded the building to the Town to be used as a library.

The conditions of sale included the provisos that no gambling of any kind be permitted on the premises, that the Memorial window remain, and that the Church bell be rung each Sabbath for Church Services. The Carnegie Foundation was promptly asked for \$4,000 to cover the cost of renovating the building, which was as promptly refused.

J.B. McKenzie of Acton was given the contract for renovations (rest rooms, a new metal ceiling) and the library opened in its new official home on October 10, 1913. Having just escaped a corner of the old Town Hall there was substantial extra space despite dividing part of the building for use as an auditorium. It was equipped with gymnastic equipment, which during World War I was used for training recruits. Just after the war, the YMCA used the facilities.

Acton Library Feels the Pinch

In 1918, without much success, the board raised the issue of larger premises for the Acton Library. The 15 by 19 foot room was inadequate for the collection let alone the possibility of a reading room. Again the Carnegie Trust was applied to without success.

In 1923 the board was taken to task at the annual provincial library convention for not spending enough on books. In their defense the board claimed that they had indeed bought 140 books the previous year, but that there was no room for many more. Later that year the Board made more noises about approaching the Carnegie Trust. Salvation came in the spring of 1933 when the Murray family left money to be used to improve library facilities, either in a new building, or through renovations in the Town Hall. In the spring of 1935, the library moved around the corner

onto Mill St. into what seemed like spacious new quarters in the front of the new YMCA building.

World War II Changes the Community

The years after World War II dramatically changed the character of both communities. Although in 1901 Acton had stood second only to Oakville in size among Halton's urban communities, there was almost no growth in population between World War I and World War II. Georgetown, by contrast, had seen steadier growth. Then between 1951 and 1971, Acton's population nearly doubled while Georgetown grew fivefold.

Most of these new residents were young families. New schools were opened, bringing with them (in some cases) special school library facilities. In Georgetown, some of the pressure was relieved when the junior collection was moved into the basement.

A New Branch for Acton

In Acton the solution was much more inspired. With Canada's Centennial still some years off, the federal government announced grants towards community projects to celebrate the nation's 100th birthday. The Library Board was first off the mark, and was selected ahead of projects like a band hall, swimming pool, or chapel at the cemetery.

The Board of Education chipped in with a shady corner of the Robert Little Public School property, and in June 1967, the new library facility opened. The new facility sparked a radical change in the way the Acton Library operated. Hours shifted from 4.5 per week to 24.5. It had its own meeting room, tables and chairs for students to work at, and improved parking. The crystal ball columnist, in the special edition of the Acton Free Press devoted to the opening, noted duct work for air conditioning, which had not been installed, and an electrical outlet at the main desk that someday in the future, will provide power for the electronic stamping of cards!

Modernization Continues

More to the point the library now had a telephone, and was in a position to request books on interlibrary loans from other libraries in the region. Ironically the future was unfolding in a library designed to the pattern approved by the Carnegie Foundation at the turn of the century!

The telephone installed in the new Acton Library was in many ways symbolic of a new era in library service on a number of levels. Since World War I, high stands of inflexible wooden shelves overflowed with books, the occasional newspaper and the National Geographic magazine. The collections had been small enough that the two or three staff knew virtually every title. The fifty years of Mrs. Isobel Watson's service are exceptional but many of the staff stayed on for decades or more.

The card catalogues were housed in a range of wooden units, and featured handwritten cards, typewritten cards and the occasional printed card purchased with a book. Some books on the shelves still had the bottom of the cloth spine painted black, with white letters neatly painted on for the call numbers. A professional cataloguer had helped in the move of the Georgetown Library in 1913 and in the conversion to the Dewey Decimal System in 1915, but the subject catalogues were full of local variations.

The staff were all from the community, and had little or no formal education in librarianship. The 1960s, in a great many other fields as well as libraries, saw a growing movement to professional education, provincial and national standards of service and a growing sense of the critical centrality of information for the economy.

The Board of Education was centralized in Halton in the late 1960s, even as the local public libraries were starting to benefit from the professional expertise of the provincially-funded regional library systems. (Halton libraries, served by the South-Central Regional Library System at one point featured the budding talents of a young graphic artist, Lynn Johnston!) In addition to bringing additional titles to a broad range of its member libraries, including Acton and Georgetown, the Regional Library System had a mandate to encourage rural libraries, so instead of dividing a small grant between Acton and Georgetown, the township of Esquesing for a few years had its own depository library in Stewarttown Hall.

The Creation of the Town of Halton Hills and the Halton Hills Public Library

Despite considerable local protest, in 1973 the provincial government shifted the footing of local government, merging Esquesing with Acton and Georgetown to create the new Town of Halton Hills. In accordance with the Public Libraries Act, there could be only one Public Library Board and in 1974 the Boards merged. In the spring of 1974 the new board hired its first professional Chief Librarian, Betsy Cornwell.

Over the ensuing two decades library service rapidly evolved. One of the first priorities of the Halton Hills Library Board was to expand and coordinate hours of service. Within a decade the hours in Acton had gone from 4.5 per week to more than 45. And by the mid-1980s Sunday hours were added in Georgetown.

The 1981 Georgetown Branch Renovation

The biggest issue facing the new Board was the severely cramped library in Georgetown. Gone was the auditorium, and extra meeting rooms in the basement. All available space was crammed with books, and the beginnings of an audio-visual collection. A calculation based on the American Library Association standards for public library service said Georgetown needed a library of about 25,000 square feet. It was stuffed into a building with less than 6,000.

Renovating and expanding on the Church St. location was looked at and discarded as inadequate; plans were drawn up for a new site two blocks down Main St. at Cedarvale Park, a setting very reminiscent of the Acton location. When this was blocked, the site at Church and Market was significantly enlarged and renovated. The Halton Hills Library and Cultural Centre opened in October 1981, adding to the library an art gallery in the former Congregational Church sanctuary and the 267-seat John Elliott Theatre. While the renovation failed to address issues of parking and included only half the space the previous studies had identified was required for library service, the facility was a dramatic improvement.

Services Expand in the 80's and 90's

At the same time the range of services and programs offered to residents of Halton Hills grew to encompass Summer Reading clubs, story times, and special performers, such as Sharon, Lois and Bram. Gordon Korman and other authors and illustrators including best-selling local children's authors and illustrators like Kathy Stinson (Red is Best) and Joanne Fitzgerald (Doctor Kiss Says Yes) spoke to enthusiastic readers of all ages.

Books on Wheels extended library services into Seniors Residences, the hospital and individual shut-ins' homes. At the same time the collection expanded in character to encompass a wide-range of book-tape kits, LPS, cassettes, and CDs, 16 mm film, Laser discs and VHS videos, and CD-ROMs. In a number of cases, the Halton Hills Public Library was among the most innovative in the province in drawing new media into the collection.

In the 1980's, the Library established a number of partnerships which remain to this day. The Georgetown branch operates in conjunction with the Parks and Recreation Department of the Town of Halton Hills. Over the last twenty years the Library has functioned as a department of the Town; albeit one managed through a Council-appointed citizen's board. Special collections have grown in partnership with special groups in the community: the Local History collection and the Esquesing Historical Society; the Literacy Collection and the North Halton Literacy Guild; the Talking Book collections and the Lion's Clubs, the Royal Canadian Legion and the Kinsmen. Efficiencies in purchasing and cataloguing the collection were achieved through cooperatives like the Library Services Centre.

In many ways the future of the library is defined by HALINET (the Halton Information Network). Originally a partnership of the Oakville, Milton and Halton Hills Public Libraries in the early 1990's, HALINET cooperatively purchased and operated a system that automated the inventory management systems. The system tracked the movements of more than 100,000 items, moving over one-third of a million times a year to the homes of upwards of 20,000 active library users.

There is an active library card in almost seven of every eight homes in Halton Hills. In the meantime, the partnership has grown well beyond the original three to include all the Public Libraries in Halton, both School Boards and Sheridan College. So too has the scope grown, as HALINET helped foster the growth of the Halton Community Network and its connections to the Internet, as well as search for ways to cooperatively license access to electronic information.

In 1995 the Halton Hills Public Library became one of the first public libraries in Canada to launch its own World Wide Web server on the Internet, where users at home or in its branches could connect with the descendants of those videotapes and freely view, amongst other things images of the Town Halls (one razed, one renovated) where free public library service started in the community 100 years before.

A New Millennium

Further enhancements and additions to the Library's collections and partnerships continued in the early years of the new century. Advances in technology saw items in the collection progress from an introduction of 35 DVD titles at the Acton Branch in 2002, to loaning out eReaders less than ten years later. Towards the end of the decade, the Library celebrated Ontario Public Library Week with the official launch of a new type of online, library catalogue that let patrons interact with others by reading and posting reviews of books and other materials.

Non-traditional items in the collection grew to include lending laptops available at both branches (for in-library use), a Spanish-language collection, a telescope and new book club sets. The digital collection launched in 2009 with downloadable audiobooks and eBooks. Digital access to materials available through the Library has grown to include online streaming of movies and TV shows, free, downloadable music and a collection of magazines that can be read on a computer or mobile device.

The Library continued to work with long-term partners and created new partnerships with organizations such as the Halton Hills Chamber of Commerce and the seniors' centres in Acton and Georgetown. New programs and initiatives were introduced, such as the Coffee, Books and Conversation Program and the Rapid Reads Collection, both of which have endured in popularity with library patrons. Joint programming with the Georgetown Branch of the Canadian Federation of University Women continues today, as does a partnership with the Halton Information Providers, to maintain records for Halton Hills in the Halton Community Services Database.

Mid-decade into the new millennium, children's services were expanded with the introduction of a comic book collection designed to appeal to reluctant readers, the launch of successful drop-in programs over March Break and the re-establishment of a dedicated children's service desk at the Georgetown Branch. The Children's Department was renamed "Children's and Youth Services" to reflect an equal emphasis on services for teens. Services breached the Library's walls when the first storytime program was held at the Gellert Community Centre, in partnership with the Town's Recreation and Parks department.

While the Library's services and collection continued to grow, its physical space did not. The early years of the new century saw numerous valiant attempts to rearrange collections, shelving and furnishings in both branches, in an attempt to operate more effectively in facilities that were much too small for the needs of the community. Additionally, having to take stairs to reach any service level at the Acton Branch made it inaccessible to anyone with mobility needs.

Expanding the Georgetown Branch and facilitating accessibility in Acton were being examined as early as 1990 and 2004 respectively. In 2006, a property directly adjacent to the Georgetown Branch became available for purchase, resulting in space to expand the branch to the needed size of approximately 26,000 square feet. With the support of the Library Board and a feasibility study, the Town purchased the property. A planning committee composed of representatives from the Library Board, Town and senior library staff was formed. The committee worked to prepare a report detailing plans for the Georgetown Branch Renovation/Expansion project, which was presented to a special meeting of Council by the Library Board. The project, however, was put “on hold” until funding could be confirmed.

Eventually funding approval came through, with a start date for construction projected for the spring of 2010, which would allow for an opening of the newly renovated branch in the fall of 2011. A temporary site to house the Georgetown Branch during the building project was secured with Holy Cross Church, as the church was building on a new site and its vacated facility was large enough to house most of the collection for a short-term duration.

A delay in the construction of Holy Cross’s new church had a domino effect on the timeline for the Georgetown Branch project, delaying its start until the church site would be available in the winter of 2011.

In the meantime, several options for installing a chair lift or elevator in the Acton Branch had been examined. The scope of this project increased dramatically in 2009 when a government Infrastructure Stimulus Funding grant became available. A concept of what to do with the Acton Branch met the parameters of the grant requirements and the Town submitted an application for the project that was successfully awarded. As a result, the Acton Branch was not simply getting an elevator, but was to get a completely new building! One of the funding stipulations required the project to be completed by March of 2011, so no time was wasted in getting the task underway.

The official ground breaking for the new Acton Branch took place in May 2010, on the same property directly adjacent to the existing building. Library services continued uninterrupted for almost all of the construction period. In addition to regular duties, staff kept busy planning, preparing and packing for the forthcoming move into the new building.

Preparations were also being made at the Georgetown Branch for the transition into the smaller space of the temporary site that would be the branch’s home for the extent of the Georgetown renovation and expansion project.

In early February of 2011, the Centennial-project Acton Branch building closed its doors to the public for the last time. The move into the new branch facility was undertaken over a period of about two weeks. The Grand Opening of the new, modern, energy-efficient and fully accessible Acton Branch Library was held Saturday, February 26th, 2011. The 9,000 square foot branch received LEED Gold certification for its use of green construction materials and its geothermal heating and cooling system. Aside from the increase in size, the facility features a meeting room, separate children’s program room, a double-sided fireplace lounge and an outdoor Terraced Green space and gardens.

Later that year, the Terraced Green served as the location for the launch of the Library's new One Book One Halton Hills Program. This annual program promotes the town-wide reading of one selected title and is accompanied by complimentary library programs. The inaugural book selected was *Midnight at the Dragon Café* by author Judy Fong Bates, who based part of her fictional book on real-life memories of her childhood spent in Acton. A large crowd came out to hear her read from the novel and to get books signed. Thanks to a warm October evening, this event was made magical by being held outside, under the stars, on the Terraced Green. Less than a month after the new Acton Branch opening, the doors at 9 Church Street in Georgetown were shut, and work began on the extensive renovation and expansion. The Branch was closed for approximately two weeks before reopening in the former Holy Cross Church at 224 Maple Avenue. Due to the weight of the stacks, the public area of the Library was located in the lower, basement level of the building. Staff did a tremendous job of designing the space to incorporate the vast majority of the branch's collection, with areas for adult fiction and non-fiction, a teen lounge and good-sized children's area, a magazine lounge, Internet workstations and a program room. Some parts of the collection, such as numerous large-print books and the entire French fiction collection were temporarily relocated to the Acton Branch in order to have those materials remain accessible to the public. An official ground breaking took place at the end of April 2011 to mark the start of construction on the Georgetown Branch Renovation Project.

The newly renovated and expanded Georgetown Branch was officially opened January 26, 2013. The project allowed the branch to grow in size from 12,000 to 34,400 square feet, including space shared with the Cultural Centre. The new and up-to-date features in the revitalized building include greatly expanded collection space for Children's and Adult materials, a Teen Lounge area, a Seniors space with Fireside Lounge, a large Children's Program Room, a large multi-purpose meeting room available for rentals, a dedicated Local History Room, permanent space for Community Partners, study rooms, Internet stations, wireless Internet access throughout the facility, self-serve checkout stations, geothermal heating and cooling systems and a green roof. In 2014 the branch was awarded LEED Silver certification for the building's environmental initiatives.

With both its branches now housed in buildings more suited to the size of their communities, the Library continues to advance and grow its services and technology. When the new Acton Branch opened and the Georgetown Branch moved into the temporary site, innovative self-checkout machines were introduced. The self-checkout stations allow patrons to check out their own materials as well as obtain information about their library accounts, such as the status of holds or amounts of fines. Radio Frequency Identification, or RFID, technology uses microchips affixed to library materials that are scanned using radio frequencies for check-out and check-in.

A commitment to the arts is an important part of the Library's mission. In 2013, the OnScreen series featuring culturally diverse and critically acclaimed films, many of which have been showcased in the Toronto International Film Festival, was launched in partnership with the Cultural Centre.. The success and popularity of this program saw the addition of an ongoing film series for youth as well as OnStage Family, headlining popular entertainers for all ages.

Providing space for people to create and collaborate remains another goal of the Halton Hills Public Library. In March of 2015 the Library opened the Creativity Centre in the Georgetown

Branch. The Creativity Centre provides free access to software and equipment for scanning photographs and slides to digital format, transferring VHS video to digital format, and using photo and video editing software.

With its strong ties to the past, a commitment to preserving the memories and heritage of the communities and people of Halton Hills and the enthusiasm for continuing to explore and provide new features and technologies, the Library looks forward to continuing to serve the population well into the future.