

## THE HAGAMAN MEMORIAL LIBRARY

During his thirty-year pastorate of the Congregational Church in East Haven, the Rev. Stephen Dodd, in the year 1824, published the East Haven Register, a small book containing "a History of the town of East Haven, from its first settlement in 1644 to the year 1800." He added a brief paragraph at the end of his page and a half chapter VI entitled "Schools and Education" which reads: "A few years since, a Library Company was formed and gathered about 75 or 80 volumes, but for several years past no regard has been paid to it, by the appointment of proper officers. Several attempts have been made to obtain a meeting of the company, but have failed!"

We can presume that the Rev. Dodd, himself, was the chief urger in this attempt to revive the "Library Company" in old East Haven. His exclamation mark seems like a finger pointing in this direction. Mr. Dodd came to the pastorate of "Old Stone" on Dec. 10, 1817. His East Haven Register appeared in print just seven years later. Whether or not his short mention of the need to revive the library had any effect we can only conjecture. There is no factual evidence one way or the other. Nor are there any existing records in as far as is known stating when or how long the "Library Company" had functioned. Mr. Dodd, we know from tradition and what has been written about him would have desired and labored for the availability of books in his community, provided they were the right kind and he could have made the selection. It is said of him that he "took a commendable interest in the schools, and always visited every school twice each term" and that "it was often remarked outside of its limits that East Haven was governed by the steeple rather than by the state." If he were successful in starting a library it may be reasonably assumed that it was of, by and for the "Meeting House" and not a public institution. A public library in East Haven was to await the passage of a century or so from the feeble and unsuccessful beginning of the "Library Company" but when the time did come at last, there were many who were ready and eager to respond to aid this endeavor.

In a previous chapter a little has been said of the many services rendered to the town by Miss Lottie F. Street. This talented and public-spirited woman had descended from a long line of distinguished East Haven encestors, one of them that Rev. Nicholas Street who had pastored the colonial meeting house on the Town Green and had built the sturdy

stone church at the corner of Main and High Streets in 1774. During the town clerkship of her father, Augustus Street, Miss Street served in the Town Hall as his assistant. Not only did she teach a class of boys in the church school of the Old Stone Church for nearly a half century, but she was the first female in town to be elected to public office. She served many terms as a member of the School Committee and was its secretary until 1914.

It was as the founder of the East Haven Library that Miss Street became best known. Early in 1909 it was brought to her attention that East Haven was one of fifteen towns in Connecticut that was without library facilities. She acted almost at once to correct this situation and with the aid of one of the state's loan libraries which shipped in a few boxes of books, reinforced by three more volumes, gifts of an anonymous citizen, the library began. On July 1, one of the hottest days of the summer, she unpacked the books in an empty cloak room on the second floor of the Town Hall and opened The Public Library.

That autumn, on Oct. 4, Miss Street went before the annual Town Meeting with a petition "to act upon the question of establishing a free Public Library, to make an appropriation for the same, and take any necessary action in order to obtain the appropriation from the state, authorized by law for that purpose, to fix the number of directors of said library and elect such directors, and to fix the amount to be annually appropriated for the purpose of said library."

Alone in a hall of men, for women had not yet been given the general voting franchise, she won support and obtained the following votes:

"Voted: That the Town appropriate \$25.00 toward a free Public Library in said town, also an annual appropriation of \$25.00 for the same.

"Voted: That nine directors be appointed for said Public Library.

"Voted: That Eben C. Sage and Dwight W. Tuttle be and are hereby appointed, and that they confer and appoint the remaining members of said directors."

The Library had thus become an official part of the Town government, its perpetuation was assured by the authorization of a suitable number of directors, and a precedent had been established assuring annual appropriation of town funds, this like the library itself was small, a collection of some four or five hundred books on rough shelves in a tiny room, little more than a cubby-hole, open two afternoons weekly on the second floor of the old Town Hall. But Miss Street's dedication to her cause was complete and she applied all the time she could spare from a busy life to make the library a success.

Within two years the cramped quarters were outgrown. A small building with three rooms was rented next door to the Town Hall. One room was sub-let to a shoemaker, another to a barber and the third, a space 12 by 14 feet, was kept for the library. Heat was provided by a small parlor stove. Members of the A.K.A.O. Society, a group of young people interested in cultural and civic betterment, put the new quarters in readiness, supplying the few necessary furnishings. In 1912, some 600 or so card-holders were listed. This year the Library received its Metcalf Book Fund which amounted to \$1,075. Other donations and bequests began to come slowly to the Library.

At the October annual Town Meeting in 1911 it had been "voted that S. E. Dibble, Jr., Samuel R. Chidsey and Mrs. D. J. Clark be appointed directors of the Library for two years, and C. W. Granniss, Eben C. Sage and Dwight W. Tuttle be appointed for three years. It was also voted that the Selectmen be empowered to provide quarters for the Library in the Hosley Block or some suitable place at a cost not exceeding \$100.00 rental a year."

No move, however, was made until 1917. At that time the discontinuance of the East Haven Post Office by the Federal Government, and its establishment as a branch of the New Haven Post Office, also the retirement of Mrs. Florence R. Andrews as East Haven's Postmaster following many years service, made available the old Post Office building. This small wooden structure stood near the front of the Andrews home on Main Street at the corner of Winchester Place. Arrangements were made to rent this building. Again The A.K.A.O. Society, following its objective of village improvement, rallied around Miss Street, as did the Boy Scouts who moved the books into the larger quarters using wheelbarrows and small wagons. The newly organized East Haven Civic Service Association provided the furnishings at the improved library. This was the period of World War I and Miss Street kept in the Library for public view an Honor Roll of the East Haven boys who had entered the service of their country. This contained the names of many of the youths whom she had aided in so many ways through her years in church school work, in public school activity and through the library.

The Town kept up its small annual appropriations at the annual town meetings each October and, beginning with 1912 the citizens at that annual civic get-together chose three of their peers as directors to aid and advise Miss Street in her work which had grown to such an extent

by 1914 that she resigned her long-time post as secretary of the Town School Committee. From the earliest years of the library Miss Street's enthusiasm had been contagious. More and more people, young and old, had become interested. The ladies of the town were among the first to enlist in her cause and at a lawn fete, largely attended on the grounds of one of the larger Thompson Avenue homes the entire proceeds, two hundred dollars went into a purse for Miss Street's library. At War's end in 1918, the library had become a going concern, a success, and patronage had reached the point that it was open to the public every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday afternoons, and Saturday evenings. During 1919 a bequest of \$1,500 was left to the library in the will of Harriet C. Forbes, widow of Albert Forbes, both old time residents of the town. At this time a son-in-law of Mrs. Forbes, Clifford L. Street proposed building a granite library in memory of his father.

On April 10, 1919, the fire which destroyed the beautiful and ancient dwelling of Mrs. Charlotte Thompson at the southeast corner of Main Street and Thompson Avenue directed library building thinking in a different direction. On June 19, plans drawn by A. William Sperry, son-in-law of Mrs. Thompson were presented to the towns people calling for the building of a new community building on the Thompson Corner to provide adequate space for civic business and community functions, all the way from a court room, lock-up, and town clerk's office, to a bowling alley, dining hall, kitchen and a public library. The idea captured the people's imagination it seeming, as the newspaper of the day expressed it "that this new community building should grace the time honored spot." But the idea was short-lived.

At a special Town Meeting in the antiquated old Town Hall on July 15, despite valiant effort by some public-spirited citizens, the project was defeated by a roll call vote of 157 to 58. The hall was crowded to its utmost capacity and overflowed down the rear stairway. The call for the meeting had proposed a town bond issue of \$175,000 for property purchase and building which would be a combined "town hall, community building and library, as well as a memorial to East Haven men who had served in the war which had ended the year before. H.H. Bradley, the moderator had frequently to call the meeting to order, as many attending were loud in their demand for better roads and other services especially in the Foxon and shore sections remote from the center.

On March 21, 1921, however there was a sudden new turn to the library's hopes for the future. The directors, having learned a few days earlier that the land and building the library was then occupying,

the former post office, was for sale, voted to buy the property, more than 33 feet on Main Street and 147 feet on Winchester Place for the sum of \$1,650.

The purchase was approved on March 29 and on April 28 the action of Directors John D. Houston, Ellsworth E. Cowles and Samuel R. Chidsey in having the East Haven Library incorporated was carried. Each member of the Library Board became a member of the corporation for as long as they continued as members, and the officers of the corporation would be the same persons holding corresponding offices in the East Haven Library Board.

Article 2 set up the purposes of the Corporation as follows: "To take, lease, purchase, or otherwise acquire, and to use, own, hold, sell, convey, exchange, lease, mortgage, work, improve, develop, cultivate, and dispose of real estate, real property and any interest or right therein and to transact any business properly connected with the work of a public library."

The little wooden library, standing on its tidy piece of ground, now safely under the ownership of the East Haven Public Library, Inc. continued to attract more and more book borrowers as East Haven expanded in the post-war boom which brought scores on scores of new families not only to the village but to the surrounding neighborhoods as well, the West End, the areas along the shore, and the hills and valleys of Foxon and Foxon Park. Year after year Miss Street, in her annual report to the Town Meeting as Librarian, reported progress and continued enthusiasm for the future. In 1924 her report mentioned the fact that the East Haven Library had reached its 15th Anniversary with a book stock of three to four thousand, and as a mark of progress had installed electric lights, a very important improvement. Then, less than a year later East Haven residents, one blustery mid-March day in 1925 opened their New Haven newspapers to the information that their neighbor, Isaac Hagaman, who had died not long before had left his entire estate, then thought to be around \$300,000 to the Town of East Haven for a Public Library. Judge Grove J. Tuttle and Mr. Frank C. Hartman were appointed by the Probate Court as appraisers. The First National Bank of New Haven had been named executor and trustee under the will. At this time the Library's directors were John D. Houston, president; Ellsworth E. Cowles, secretary-treasurer; Clifford Street, Mrs. Henry H. Bradley, Mrs. John Stone, Harry Page and Sherwin Haskell. Heirs of Mr. Hagaman, nephews and neices residing in New York State, contested the will and a legal battle followed in November, 1926 in the Superior Court in New Haven, Before Judge Christopher L. Avery and a jury.

An interesting sidelight on the trial is the following editorial

entitled "Mr. Hagaman's Library Bequest" which appeared in the New Haven Journal Courier:

"The extent of the bequest to East Haven by the late Isaac Hagaman (over \$3000,000) makes the baffling of his wishes in the courts a more conspicuous matter than is usually the case. It is not uncommon for small estates thus to be contested and by dickering a balance be struck between disputing parties. Although for years he had talked of his intention to leave his money for a library in East Haven and the Probate Court upheld the will, an attempt by Poughkeepsie cousins, with whom the old man had no touch, to prove that he was incapable of making a will, is successful to the point that a compromise is decided wise. Those charged with executing the will, including the selectmen of East Haven who were naturally guided by their city consultants, are fearful of what twelve jurymen may do, and so the cousins and their lawyers, get an amount said to be about \$90,000. It is a case of half a loaf being better than no bread.

"The case presents a number of aspects that interest laymen who are perturbed by the upsetting of a will. It may be their turn next. The precedent is bad. They marvel that citizens apparently sane can in the heat of courtroom controversy be disposed of as incompetent mentally. Especially distrust of a jury's wisdom as in this case and a readiness to resort to an alternative leaves an unpleasant impression. To a lawyer, however, the mere fact that an old gentleman wishes to do something for his town, and so puts it in writing before a lawyer who testifies that Mr. Hagaman is competent to perform the act -- these things are but the beginning. There are the machinery and uncertainties of a trial to be taken into consideration.

"A troop of hospital nurses may come in, as in this case, and recite eccentric things, as to an old gentleman. The young are normal. A clever imported lawyer may be manifestly successful in impressing a jury. The wise thing, it is reasoned, is to refrain from gambling on a decision by the twelve and to get as much as possible."

"Such cases are fresh impeachments of the jury system, which is much under criticism the country over. General Grant said that the best way to deal with a bad law is to enforce it; thus offended public sentiment will rally and force its repeal. We are inclined to think that it would be a service to fight to a finish such cases as the old man Hagaman's. Let juries do their worst and permit not only the \$90,000 but the whole fortune to go to claimants in a score of cases. Then a revulsion in sentiment at the inability of the present system to carry out the wishes of the might



lead to getting issues of this sort before a tribunal, judicial or otherwise, less susceptible to oratory and the uncertain psychology of old gentlemen's peculiar ways. Hagaman had a chance to remember these cousins and deliberately declined it. Many a man in such a position would rather those who represented him lost every dollar than fail to assert his wishes to the last ditch. This may be foolishness to lawyers and business acumen, but to the layman it is sorry business that testimony of an expert, who never knew Mr. Hagaman, and the tendency to believe a man mentally distraught if the suggestion is sufficiently promoted by discussion can figure in crippling the fulfillment of a cherished and commendable purpose."

In June, 1927, the Hagaman heirs, according to announcement in the probate Court, had been paid \$70,000 to end the litigation. The estate was appraised, amounted to \$306,658.81 of which, after settlement and litigation expenses, left approximately \$110,000 to be applied to the construction of a library building and \$70,000 to be turned over to the First National Bank in trust, the interest to be used for maintenance of the library. The site, the old Hagaman homestead had already been donated by the testator. During the same month the furnishings and equipment of the ancient structure were sold at public auction.

The Hagaman homestead dating from about 1769 and its near neighbor, the homestead of F. Fuel Andrews were both jacked up on heavy timbers and moved backward some distance from Main Street to new locations facing the new Library Square, and on Nov. 30, ground for the new Library was broken. The cornerstone laying took place Feb. 10, 1928 with Chairman Bradley of the Library directors as master of ceremonies and Rev. Nils Heermans, rector of Christ Episcopal Church, and Rev. Daniel J. Clark, pastor emeritus of the Old Stone Church participating. Miss Street, Librarian had the honor of placing the contents in the box within the cornerstone.

The Library Building began to take form in the middle of the spacious Library Square. The builders were the H. Wales Lines Company and the architects, Davis & Walldorff. The reception and opening of the handsome new Hagaman Memorial took place on the evening of Sept. 22, 1928. According to the newspaper report of the occasion "the library interior was a revelation to the throngs who viewed it for the first time. They had watched the beautiful structure as it came into being on the site of the old Hagaman homestead which has been turned into the new 'Library Square' with streets surrounding the attractive building on all four sides." The first floor contained a large circulating room, elliptical in shape. The east wing is given over to an adult reading room while the west wing is the children's room. Each room has a large fireplace, cream color decorations, and features include valuable antiques from the old Hagaman homestead.