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Days Past: Fifty years of the Prescott Public Library on Goodwin Street

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PRESCOTT LIBR

Rendering of Prescott Public Library, 1978, artist unknown. Prescott Public Library Vertical File Archives. Prescott History: Li (1100-2025-3903). (Prescott Public Library/Courtesy)



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Books were important to the people of Prescott from its genesis. In 1864 the first territorial government arrived. Territorial Secretary Richard McCormick brought 300 volumes with which to start the Arizona Territorial Library and a printing press on which the Arizona Miner newspaper would begin.

The books would go on to establish the first library in the area. They were initially only intended for territorial officials; however, while these men were still the only ones permitted to check out the books, it became administration policy to allow anyone in Prescott to come and read them.

A reading room to be enjoyed by all continued to be important to the City of Prescott. The Prescott Library Association (PLA) was founded in 1870 and struggled to stay open. At one time in the attic of the Bashford Building, it was later in an old schoolhouse on a downtown lot donated to them for three years. Even The Palace Saloon had a reading room.

In 1895 the Monday Club was founded to create a culture of music, discussion and reading in Prescott. By 1897 the Monday Club rekindled the PLA, and by 1899, Julia Goldwater reached out to philanthropist Andrew Carnegie to ask for a grant with which to build a library. The cost of the library was \$8000. Carnegie would wait until money was raised to pay for the first \$4000 and he would pay the other \$4000. Immediately, William A. Clark of the United Verde Mine gave \$250 and a yearly subscription to Popular Science Monthly. The lot the library would be built on cost \$3500. Maria Fisher Gage, one time president of the PLA, died in 1902; her husband, mining and railroad executive E. B. Gage said he would contribute \$1000 toward the lot payment if there was a memorial for his wife. The Monday Club commissioned a memorial stained-glass window from artist Edwin Weary of Chicago. The window exists in the same building at Gurley and Marina to this day.

When the Carnegie Library opened in 1905, it was standard practice for only one librarian to be on staff for \$40 per month and to keep the doors open on weekdays from "10-12 am [sic], 1-5 pm, 7-9 pm." When the library celebrated its 50th birthday in November 1953, it had 4,041 books in circulation.

But the 1960s were a time of change —not just culturally but for the Prescott Public Library. Allen Rothlisberg became library director in 1963. In 1966 he created a large print section. In 1967 he created the Friends of the Prescott Public Library, an association which supports the library in many aspects, not least of which is funding for programs. In 1967 the collection

began to be tracked with a card catalog system. In 1968 the library purchased a bookmobile to better serve Yavapai County. The collection reached 25,000 volumes, with 1,500 in the newly created Southwest Collection. Rothlisberg worked with the City Council to move periodicals and technical services to the basement of City Hall. The library needed more space.

After some deliberation, the Prescott City Council selected the present site at Goodwin and Marina and broke ground on March 11, 1973. When the new Prescott Public Library opened on May 18, 1975, the library had a collection of 70,000 volumes in addition to newspapers, periodicals and phonograph records.. For a time children could check out toys and hamsters.

In May 2025, the Prescott Public Library celebrated fifty years in the current building—which has been transformed several times over the years (the square footage was doubled in 2006)—and continues to strive for improvement and to serve the people of Prescott.

"Days Past" is a collaborative project of the Sharlot Hall Museum and the Prescott Corral of Westerners International (www.prescottcorral.org). This and other Days Past articles are also available at www.archives.sharlothallmuseum.org/articles/days-past-articles/1. The public is encouraged to submit proposed articles and inquiries to dayspast@sharlothallmuseum.org. Please contact SHM Research Center reference desk at 928-277-2003, or via email at archivesrequest@sharlothallmuseum.org for information or assistance with photo requests.