

MERIS MORRISON

'One Hundred Years of Giving'

In 1887, Brattleboro was a flourishing town of railroads, logging, manufacturing, printing and the Estey Organ Co.

It was also the cultural center for the Windham County region. The Brattleboro Reformer newspaper had been established in 1884. President Grover Cleveland dedicated the Statue of Liberty in October of 1886, the base of which was designed by Brattleboro born Richard Morris Hunt, "the Vanderbilt architect" of Newport's 'Breakers' and brother to painter, William Morris Hunt.

It was in that time and setting — Jan. 25, 1887, to be exact — that the director of the Boston Public Library, Mellen Chamberlain, came to speak to the townspeople on the opening of their new library. This event was to become a focal point in the intellectual and cultural life of the town.

Brattleboro was becoming a gathering point of men and women of intellectual aspirations and of venturesome ideas. Mary Wilkins Freeman published her first book in 1886. Mary Howe, started her European training for her operatic career.

Chamberlain, former principal of Brattleboro High School, expounded on the theme presented from a quote by Victor Hugo, "All human advancement will be accomplished by swelling the legions of those who read."

In the establishment of libraries like the one presented by George J. Brooks to the town of Brattleboro, Chamberlain discerned the hope of the world.

George J. Brooks was the son of sea captain William Smith Brooks who settled in 1821 in Chesterfield, N.H. and established a cotton factory at the outlet of Lake Spofford. Captain Brooks died in Brattleboro in 1865.

George J. Brooks, having made his fortune in a variety of profitable enterprises in California, returned to live in Brattleboro upon his retirement.

After building the Brooks House

hotel in 1871-72, at a cost of \$150,000, Brooks turned his interest to providing a library for the town. In October, 1885, he bought the old Goodhue Homestead on Main Street (now the Post Office Parking Area) with the purpose of building the Brattleboro Free Library. Groundbreaking took place in that year and the building was completed by December 1886.

He was elected representative to the state Legislature in the autumn of 1886 "in recognition of his gifts to the town," according to historian Mary R. Cabot in the "Annals of Brattleboro; 1681-1895."

Only a month before the dedication, Brooks died suddenly from what was described as "a disease of the heart." His library dedication speech was found upon his desk. It put forth his belief in the importance of his contribution to the town.

"A well selected library is a powerful and wise educator, and should receive fostering care and generous financial backing. It is an especial blessing to the poor and those in moderate circumstances, to whom the buying of many books would be a burden or an impossibility. It is therefore entirely fit that it should be sustained, like our common schools, by a tax on property," it said.

Gifts of endowment have been provided to support cultural and educational enterprises in every society, and individuals have used their money to influence the direction of the society. Over the years art works, historical documents, book collections and individual donations have been given to the George J. Brooks Library.

Memorial gifts continue to find their way here and are used to purchase special books and materials that reflect the wishes of the donors.

The present building dedicated 20 years ago in 1967, to the memory and spirit of George J. Brooks, contains history of the past and technology of the present. Today, Brooks Memorial Library and its West Brattleboro Branch have more than 100,000

books, 3,500 records, and 125 magazine and newspaper subscriptions.

We provide programs for all ages through such activities as lecture-discussion series, children's story hour, films and informative lectures. We loan a variety of audio-visual equipment including tape recorders, typewriters, record players and projectors.

The children's room provides recreational and informational books and materials for pre-school children up through junior high. A parent's shelf includes information on how to utilize these materials with children.

The reference collection provides information on topics ranging from local government to international issues. Interlibrary loan from other libraries allows access to a wealth of resources. Telephone reference and on-line data base searching are also available through the library.

Our record and tape collection was given a boost in 1980 when the Chelsea House Folk Music Center donated 500 records.

The local history and genealogy room includes historical photographs by Porter Thayer, Benjamin Crown, and the Brattleboro Inc. Photo Collection.

On Sunday, April 12, at 3 p.m., we will celebrate the spirit of George J. Brooks with "100 Years of Giving." New gifts will be presented to the library, including the Horace Mann genealogy given by descendent, Dorthea Stockwell; "The Vermont Postal History" presented by the Brattleboro Stamp Club; and a video tape recorder presented by Vermont Yankee.

The short, comic play "Surrounded; A Tale of the Revolution" will feature David Paul Simon portraying George Washington. A reception will follow the play. These events are planned to coincide with National Library Week April 5-12. All ages are invited to this free family celebration of "100 years of Giving."

Meris Morrison is the director of Brooks Memorial Library.