



The
Oakwood
Historical Society

— *Make History With Us* —

Historian

Preserving the past, present, and future of the Oakwood Community • Spring 2018

**Get
Involved.
Make History
With Us!**

Wright Library – Always Evolving

—Harrison Stamm Gowdy & Leah Konicki

Editors' Note: Today's visitors to Wright Memorial Public Library are greeted with a tunnel of plastic sheeting obscuring the views of the front reading rooms as the library undergoes renovation and restoration. Between now and the end of summer, the project will restore some of the original character to the front reading rooms, add a study room, and improve work space in the library. Because this renovation has renewed community interest in the library, which has served Oakwood in one location or another for over 100 years, we have updated an article that Society members supplied to the Oakwood Register's October 3, 2012 issue.

Inside

President's Message	2
Upcoming Events	3
Wright Library (cont.)	4-5
Us Making History	6
Herb Garden Academy	7

Wright Memorial Library has been prominently located along Far Hills Avenue since 1939. The library sits in Katharine Wright Park, which was named after Orville and Wilbur Wright's sister. The house that originally occupied this land was moved to 25 Aberdeen, where it still stands. Photos of the park before it was dedicated show a barn and chicken house on the property. However, this park was the not the first location of a library in Oakwood.

Oakwood's first library was in the house known as Briar Hill, which still stands on Briar Hill Avenue, just off Park Avenue near Oakwood Avenue. This house was the home of the Parrott family, an early prominent and civic-minded family. In 1913, a group of women including Mrs. Parrott called to the community to donate one book per family to establish a library.

Libraries in America date back to colonial times. However, these libraries were very different from what we think of as a library today. The first libraries were not really public; they were subscription libraries. Private citizens established them to share books among members of a literary society. There were also circulating libraries housed in bookstores, which helped the bookstores promote both books and reading. As early as 1830, school districts funded libraries through taxes. A modern library combines the characteristics of these early libraries: books that circulate, books for the masses, and libraries supported by public money.

In 1913, when the first library at Briar Hill opened, Oakwood was small. The city had been incorporated just five years earlier, when there were only 67 houses in the town and the only school building was a renovated barn where Harman School now stands. Oakwood was a progressive city with progressive leaders like John H. Patterson, president of NCR, who donated an additional 100 books to match those donated by the community. However, it was soon apparent that a library housed in a private home was not the best solution.



An early photo shows that the view of the library from Far Hills Avenue has not changed through the years



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(Continued on p. 4)

**THE OAKWOOD
HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Message from the President

Dear Members,

I want to begin my message by thanking outgoing President Carol Holm and Mark Risley, a longtime Director and Committee Chair, for their many years of service and outstanding leadership. While Carol is stepping down as president, she will remain on the board; Mark, however, has decided to retire. My only consolation is the knowledge that they have both promised to remain active members and continue to lend their valued talents!

Under Carol's helm we started the year well positioned for an outstanding 2018. Already we have seen a record number of participants at our Far Hills Speaker Series and experienced our first Vintage Valentine's Party. Planning for our annual favorite events such as Wright at Home in April, A Taste of Wine and Cheese in May, and Classics on the Lawn in August, is in the competent hands of our committee chairs. As the "new" president, I marvel at how our 100% volunteer-run organization is able to meet the varied expectations of a community that values heritage and treasures its traditions.

This year we will refocus our energies toward historic preservation by welcoming new board member, Ms. Alex Duncan, as our first Preservation Coordinator. At our Board of Director's meeting in March, with the help of other board members, volunteers, and outside resources, we will begin the process of defining the role The Society might play in advocating for preservation. We want to find the balance between preserving the uniqueness of our community's historical architecture and supporting the many desires of individual homeowners and changing community needs. As a lover of what's old, I hold firmly to the belief that "Historic preservation is not about living in the past, but rather about preparing for the future." With old homes being updated, new homes being built, and our public buildings being expanded and renovated, a focus on preservation is more important than ever.

As has been expressed before, we are fortunate to live in a city with so many well-preserved homes and buildings representing early - to mid-20th century architecture. Our historic homes, schools, and city buildings define us as a community. As a local historical society, we seek to be a resource and to be present when change and development are being considered.

There's no place like Oakwood, and it's ours to protect.

Respectfully Yours,

Leigh Turben
President

What Is Unique about Your Home?

We are researching offbeat qualities of houses in Oakwood for a possible future article in the *Historian*. Perhaps your home was moved from another location, was a farmhouse or a store, or has unique features. Send an email to TOHSnewsletter@gmail.com, and we will get back to you!



Upcoming Events

***March 18** - Far Hills Speaker Series - *Street Names of Dayton* – The men and women whose streets bear their name and how they contributed to the history of Dayton. Presenter Angie Hoschouer is the Manager of Development and Marketing for Woodland Cemetery. She is a member of the Ohio Genealogical Society with a status of First Family of Ohio and First Family of Green County. Wright Library Lower Level, 2 p.m., free.

***April 8** - Far Hills Speaker Series - *Jack Egan, Dayton Lawyer - A Short History of Dayton's Dark Side from 1899 to 1936* – Back by popular demand! A captivating tale of Jack Egan, prominent defense attorney for a bewildering assortment of bank robbers, bootleggers, hit men, con men, and gangsters. Presenter David Greer is a trial lawyer and author of three books about local historical characters and the history of the Dayton Bench and courts from 1796 to 1930. Wright Library Lower Level, 2 p.m., free.

***April 15** - Far Hills Speaker Series - *The Classic Architecture of Oakwood* – Learn how some of Oakwood's well-preserved homes and public buildings represent the best of 20th century architecture in America. Presenter Mark W. Risley served as President of The Society for three terms. Mark is one of Oakwood's most active experts on local history and architectural preservation. Wright Library Lower Level, 2 p.m., free.

April 22 - Wright at Home – The Wright Family home, Hawthorn Hill, will be open for tours, and Society volunteers will conduct walking tours of Orville Wright's Oakwood neighborhood, recounting stories about his noteworthy and industrial neighbors. This program is a collaboration between The Society and Dayton History. Tours operate from noon to 5 p.m. Full information available at www.oakwoodhistory.org

May 19 - A Taste of Wine and Cheese – This annual wine and cheese party complements Oakwood's That Day in May activities. It will be held at the Long-Romspert Homestead House Museum from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. The popular event featuring fine wines, good food, and friendly conversation gives residents the opportunity to tour the historic home while relaxing from a full day of community events. Information available at www.oakwoodhistory.org

*The Far Hills Speaker Series is co-hosted by The Oakwood Historical Society and Wright Memorial Public Library.

Fall Far Hills Speaker Series: Focus on World War II

For the first time this fall, the Far Hills Speaker Series will be organized around a theme. The presentations are co-hosted with Wright Memorial Public Library and take place on Sunday afternoons at 2 p.m. in the library's lower level. Watch future issues of the *Historian* for details.

September 16 - *Dayton Codebreakers* – The remarkable history of Joseph Desch, the WAVES, and the Dayton Codebreakers.

October 21 - *Polonium in the Playhouse - The Manhattan Project* – An intriguing story of secret chemical production for the atomic bomb in the Talbot Family's Runnymede Playhouse in Oakwood.

November 18 - *The Russian Spy in the Dayton Manhattan Project* – Learn about George Koval, an American-born spy who gave secrets of the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union.

Wright Library – Always Evolving *(Continued from p. 1)*

Therefore, in 1916 when the newly built Harman School was opened, school officials designated an area for the community library. According to an oral history with Catherine Hadelor, one of the city's first librarians, the spot was a bookcase that had glass doors. She remembers the library was originally staffed by teachers and open to the public only a few hours a week.

By the 1900s, there was a huge national campaign to build libraries led by two men: Melvil Dewey, the founder of the Dewey Decimal System, and Andrew Carnegie, the second richest man in history and pioneer of the American steel industry. Dewey invented the look and feel of the modern library. His slogan was “the best reading for the largest numbers at the least cost.” He established library reforms including a standardized and efficient system for cataloging books that allowed for easier lending.

Andrew Carnegie felt libraries should be free and accessible to all. Acting on his belief, he funded over 1,600 libraries in the United States. His timing was perfect because many new communities were being planned in the 1890s through the 1920s, and libraries were becoming more and more popular.

Although Oakwood did not request a Carnegie Grant, citizens recognized the growing need for a separate structure, a community library. In 1922, the school system closed the library at Harman School due to a lack of funding. In response, John R. Fletcher, the president of the library board, donated a house he owned at 45 Park Avenue to serve as a library. Today, this building houses the Little Exchange. Known as the Oakwood Library Building, its doors opened in 1924 with 1,500 books and two librarians.

This little house was not an adequate library for a growing city. In 1937, despite the Depression, the Library Board voted to place a \$40,000 bond issue before voters. One of the members at this time was Orville Wright, who had joined the board in 1934. Orville was an extremely private man and as part of his agreement to join the library board it is said that he was never to preside over a meeting and never to be quoted. At the time of the bond issue, Oakwood had already established Katharine Wright Park behind Smith School. The new library building, called Wright Memorial Library, honored three family members. Unfortunately, Wilbur and Katharine were not alive to enjoy the honor; Wilbur had died in 1912 and Katharine in 1929. Orville did not object to the naming, and even contributed funds to promote the bond issue.

In March 1938, library trustees approved plans for a Tudor Revival style building designed by local architects Schenck & Williams. This firm had designed several buildings in Oakwood and Dayton, including Oakwood's city building, Smith School, and Oakwood High School. They were also responsible for the Wright's home, Hawthorn Hill.



The stained-glass window on the right side of this photograph was not part of the original library. The 2018 renovation will replace the overhead lights.



The ornate main entrance to the library is typical of Tudor Revival architecture. According to a scholar, the hieroglyphics above the front door cannot be translated into a meaningful message.

Schenck & Williams are best known for their designs in the Tudor Revival style, which was a popular style for houses and civic buildings in the 1920s and 1930s; Wright Library is an excellent example. The library's steeply pitched roof, prominent central cross gable, windows with small panes, and ornate carved entrance are all elements of the Tudor Revival style. The library was built of natural materials, such as slate for the roof, brick for the exterior walls, and brick and stone surrounding doors and windows; these are also typical of the style.

In the interior, the small vestibule opens into a large open area which includes the two main reading rooms flanking the central circulation desk. High ceilings accented by oak beams enhance the open quality of the reading rooms. The original oak tables and chairs are still in use today and are being refinished as part of the current renovation. Their size was always intended to allow citizens to share space and build a sense of community. At each end of the building, large Tudor-arched windows provide an abundance of natural light and integrate the building with its setting.

This new Tudor Revival library was opened on Valentine's Day 1939. The minutes from the first board meeting describe the opening as a fifteen-minute dedication that started at 8:00 p.m. with approximately 200 attendees. The community was then invited to explore the library, but after only thirty minutes, the lights went off. Several neighbors went home and returned with candles to illuminate the building until all visitors could be escorted out. According to Dayton Power and Light officials, the transformer on Far Hills was not large enough to generate the additional power the library required.

The operating budget in 1939 was \$9,000, or approximately \$160,500 in 2018 dollars. This money funded all salaries, maintenance of the building and the park surrounding the library, book purchases, and utilities.

When the library opened, there were three librarians. These young, unmarried women were charged with cataloging the books and pasting pockets and cards in the back of books for checkout. There were also two Works Progress Administration workers who helped the librarians and repaired book bindings. Other girls shelved books for a wage of five cents an hour.

The library has continued to grow and adapt to changing times. Additions in 1964, 1972, and 1982 provided air conditioning, a meeting room in the lower level, additional space for circulating materials, and a modern children's room. Important renovations in the past twenty years have allowed the library to navigate changing technology needs. The renovations currently underway reflect a commitment to preserving the unique history and character of the library, such as replacing fluorescent tube lighting with fixtures that better fit the style of the building. From Far Hills, the building appears much as it did when it was originally built and retains its original charm. More importantly, the library continues to support literacy and serve as a center of community life.



The large windows in the reading rooms unite the library with its setting.

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Please get involved...

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Us Making History

Homestead Updates



Board Members and volunteers hand scrubbed the floors in the 1920 living and dining rooms with steel wool pads before applying polyurethane, preserving the original character of the homestead museum. Phyllis Niemeyer Miller led the detail with her husband Kent, several Boy Scouts, and volunteers Tiffany Rubin, Mark Risley, and Linda Pearson. Phyllis estimates it took almost an hour to clean one square foot. Thanks to the scrub team The Society saved hundreds of dollars and preserved the authentic look of the floors.

Just as the furnace on the 1860's side of The Homestead was repaired, the blower motor on 1920s side furnace stopped working. Korreect Heating/HVAC made the repair at a cost of \$685.

Holiday Events

The Society's annual Holiday Open House was held on December 3. Many residents enjoyed seeing the house decorated in the time periods reflective of when the various additions were built. Docents retold the stories of the Long and Romsper families. Families enjoyed decorating homemade apple cinnamon ornaments and the sweet and savory snacks prepared by Society members.



For the second year, The Society hosted Oakwood's Winter Market on December 10. Although hosting this event required removing furniture from five rooms, pulling up carpets, and removing display items, it gave The Society an opportunity to partner with the Winter Market organization and attracted new visitors to The Homestead. Winter Market organizers had 20 volunteers working the booths and entertaining children. Proceeds from the event went to the Winter Market organization, which donates money to Oakwood schools.

Ramp Rebuilt

This past fall Peter Salisbury of Oakwood Boy Scout Troop 101 chose to rebuild the homestead's 15-year-old accessibility ramp as his Eagle Scout project.



Peter led 24 volunteers who worked a total of 177 hours to complete the ramp. To honor The Homestead's architectural integrity, Peter used antique porch railings found at a salvage store to finish off the landing. Peter joins the ranks of other Eagle Scouts who have made major contributions to preserving one of Oakwood's treasured homes.

Vintage Valentine Party

The Society hosted its inaugural Vintage Valentine Party on February 10. Guests enjoyed champagne, wine, and appetizers along with fun activities such as speed dating, the Newlywed Game, and a themed photo area.



Herb Garden Academy Reconvenes this April

Repeating a successful program, The Society will invite students in grades four through six to learn the art of growing and using herbs and vegetables. The 12-session program begins in April and runs through September. Each biweekly, 75-minute, Monday evening session will cover a topic relating to the care and use of herbs.



This past summer, participants planted the garden behind the 1920's kitchen and tended it until it was time to winterize the bed. Using edible flowers, vegetables, and herbs from the garden, students made salsa, pesto pasta, pizza, herb biscuits, and flavored mints. Just as the Long and Romspert children probably did, students discovered which flowers make the best edible candy. Toward the end of the growing season, students learned to dry herbs for the winter and jarred their own herb mixes. The children are proud that their garden is a member of the Dayton Community Gardens program.



Information about the program will be given to Oakwood Elementary students in March and appear in www.oakwoodhistory.org



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The information that you submit will be used only by The Oakwood Historical Society and will not be given or sold to outside parties.
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