

The Carnegie Libraries of California

On Wednesday, April 23, 1902, California's first Carnegie library opened in San Diego. It was a beautiful building and an outstanding example of the Classical Revival style. Nineteen years later, on November 15, 1921, in the small community of Orosi, the last of California's 142 public and two academic Carnegie libraries was completed. The Orosi Carnegie library is still in use today, as a branch library in the Tulare County Free Library System. It is a simple frame structure and its contrast to the San Diego building illustrates the wide range of architectural styles that were used in constructing Carnegie libraries between 1902 and 1921. Sadly, the San Diego Carnegie library was demolished in 1952.

California is second only to Indiana in the number of grants to construct Carnegie library buildings. The libraries were built from Alturas in the north to Calexico in the south. Each library large or small represented a significant commitment by the people in the community. The Carnegie grant was to be used to construct the building, while the community was expected to provide a site and to tax itself at the annual rate of 10% of the grant amount for the purchase of books and for staffing and upkeep of the library.

Currently, only 85 of the original Carnegie public library buildings are still standing. Of these 36 are still operating as libraries; 21 are museums, 13 are used for community services; the remaining 15 have a variety of uses. The two academic Carnegies are still used by their colleges, but now for classrooms and administration. These buildings, regardless of their use, are clearly a part of the California

heritage and should be preserved. This web site has been constructed to introduce people to the diversity of the history and architecture of California's Carnegie libraries and to show how they look today. In addition to those buildings still in use, the history of the demolished libraries is also described along with a picture, where available.

This project is a collaborative effort between Lucy Kortum and Pat and Bernie Skehan. Mrs. Kortum conducted a survey of the Carnegie Libraries in California for the California State Office of Historic

Her books on California history include one on W. H. Weeks, the architect who designed 22 of the Carnegie Libraries in California. Her collection of 30,000

Educational institutions are often founded on and influenced by philanthropy. One of the strongest examples of this is the founding of over two thousand Carnegie Libraries in Europe, the United States, and the English speaking world in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. Just like other educational institutions, the Carnegie Libraries were influenced heavily by the world around them. The strongest influence came from the source of the money, Andrew Carnegie, who had very strong feelings as to why these libraries were needed including his belief in an America that was a meritocracy and that his libraries would benefit immigrants.