

The Centennial of the Bloomsburg Public Library Building

By Robert Dunkelberger

The 1920s were a busy time for new public buildings in Bloomsburg. Three built during the decade were designed by the Philadelphia architectural firm of Ritter and Shay. The Ritter of the partnership was Verus T. Ritter, who grew up in Bloomsburg. Verus' first major commission was the Morning Press building on Main Street, and he went on to greater fame in Williamsport, Huntington, WV, and especially Philadelphia.

Even though he left Bloomsburg, Verus continued to keep in touch with his hometown, primarily because his parents and in-laws still lived here and his sister Amy had married the co-owner of the *Morning Press* newspaper, Paul Eyerly. When a big project was being considered in Bloomsburg, Verus was there to present a plan. This was true with the new St. Matthew Lutheran church, which celebrated the 100th anniversary of its dedication this past October. A second was a junior-senior high school, to replace the building that burned in October 1923. But that was a multi-year project that would not be completed until a dedication ceremony was held in April 1927. Finished sooner than that was a public library building.

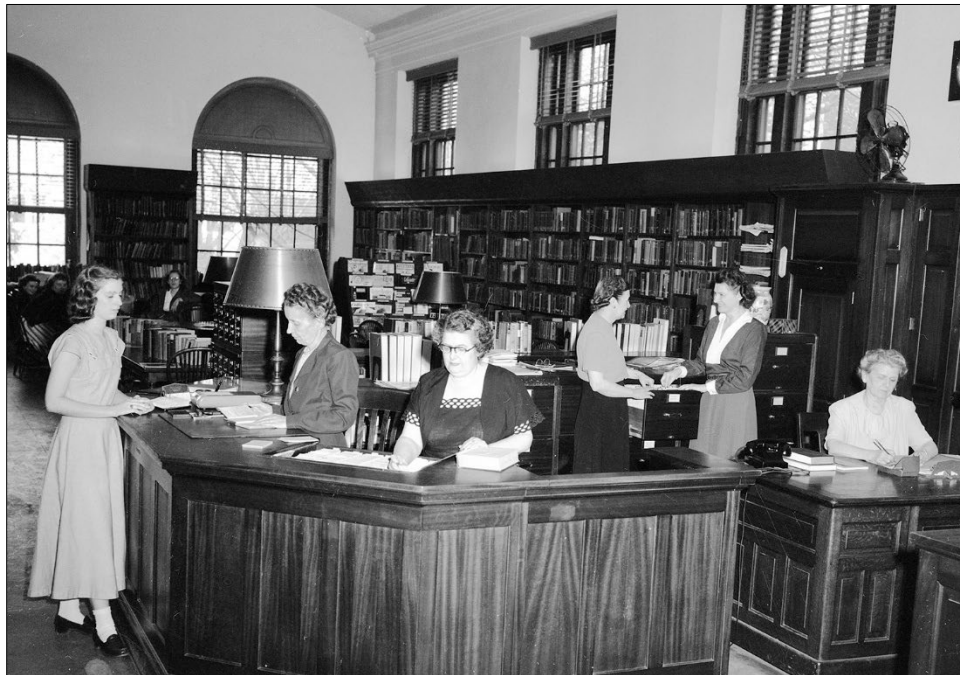
A public library in the community dated back to 1889, when the Bloomsburg Library Company was chartered. A small library operated for several years in cooperation with the Women's Christian Temperance Union and Y.M.C.A, but then ceased its work. It was revived in 1902 by a group of clubs—the Civic, Century, Ivy, and Wednesday—which steadfastly supported its mission. Books were acquired and a room rented in the Clark dry goods store building (later occupied by the Gelb & Mayer department store) at the southeast corner of Main and Center streets. The room was at the rear of the building, on the second floor with an address of 223 Center Street. The original collection when the library opened on June 18, 1903, numbered 4,000 volumes. Within five years it had expanded to two large rooms and by 1914 the collection had grown to more than 8,500 books.

The library was located on Center Street for more than 20 years, becoming increasingly cramped with no room to expand. Starting in the mid-1910s, there was growing demand for the library to have a building of its own. A fund was established for this purpose in 1923 and the following year a drive was inaugurated to raise the money needed for construction. It concluded after just one week with a meeting on December 16, when it was announced that the amount sought had been oversubscribed in the sum of \$108,000, inciting a wild demonstration.

A month before the drive ended, the library directors found out they had land on which to build. In August 1924, the directors of the Bloomsburg Y.M.C.A. decided to shut down its operations and donate a 37' by 198' plot on Market Street, just south of the First National Bank, to serve as the library's new home. The library directors accepted the gift and unanimously chose Ritter & Shay as architects. A crowd of hundreds witnessed the cornerstone being laid with appropriate

ceremonies on May 27, 1925, during which the library was called “a monument to Bloomsburg spirit” and “the greatest civic undertaking Bloomsburg has ever known.”

Construction progressed through the rest of the year and in January 1926 the old library was emptied and the contents moved a block to the west. On Saturday, January 30, the new building opened for the first time, with nearly 1,300 people visiting that day. The facility was a two-story structure, with the Market Street facade in a Georgian colonial design and measured 37’ in width and 82’ deep. The extra space to the rear left plenty of room for future development. The building was furnished with the finest equipment in a warm and colorful interior, at a cost of under \$60,000. The additional money raised was placed in an endowment fund.



A Bloomsburg High School student is seen checking out a book from head librarian Marion Mauser; May 1950. The photo was taken in the current children's library on the second floor. (Morning Press Negative Collection - Andruss Library. Courtesy of the Press Enterprise.)

The original layout was much different from the current arrangement, even before the addition was completed in 1998. The first floor was divided into two areas: the front half inside the entrance initially held exhibits of material from the Columbia County Historical Society, while the back half was community meeting space, the reference collection, and an area for receiving and processing books. The second floor, one large room with an 18-foot high vaulted ceiling, was reached by a double wrought iron stairway. The front half held the juvenile library, with adults and the main collection in the back, and the circulation desk at the head of the stairs. It was a building the entire town celebrated and has continued to for the past century.

Since the library was heavily used, over the years it again proved to be too small, just as the rooms on Center Street had filled. Although it took decades, in 1992 planning began to either expand the current building or construct a new one. Space was so tight that for every new book added to the collection, one had to be withdrawn. Initially only the parking lot behind the library was proposed as space for an addition, but in October 1992 two buildings just to the south along Market Street and Pine Avenue were purchased for \$234,000. It took two years, but both buildings were taken down during December 1994 and January 1995.

In 1995 a new library fund drive raised nearly \$1 million for the expansion project. Plans were finalized the following year and the groundbreaking ceremony for the \$1.2 million project was held on March 8, 1997. The expansion would add 6,600 square feet, bringing the total size of the library up to 12,000. Work started soon after the ceremony and was completed just over a year later in June 1998. Seventy-two years after its initial construction, the Bloomsburg Public Library had grown once again and still provides the same valuable services to the citizens of Bloomsburg that it has since its founding.