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Book Review:

Martin, Robert S. *Carnegie Denied: Communities Rejecting Carnegie Library Construction Grants, 1898-1925*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1993.

Robert Sydney Martin's *Carnegie Denied: Communities Rejecting Carnegie Library Construction Grants, 1898-1925* expands on George Bobinski's 1969 history of the Carnegie libraries, concentrating specifically on those communities that were approved for library construction grants and subsequently refused these grants. A collection of seven chapters organized by region and written by different contributors, the book was commissioned by noted library historian Wayne Wiegand upon his discovery of an article on Wheeling, West Virginia's refusal of Carnegie grant. Wheeling's opposition had largely been the result of antipathy toward Carnegie following the Homestead strike of 1892, a pivotal event in American labor history. The idea that opposition in other towns may have been a factor in their own refusals of Carnegie grants is a running theme in *Carnegie Denied*, if not necessarily the thesis of the work.

Steel baron and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie began his drive to fund library construction in the 1880s. Even his early (pre-Homestead) efforts proved controversial; the book's first chapter deals with the controversies over the location and ongoing funding of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. The latter issue would become the primary sticking point in the majority of subsequent refusals of Carnegie grants by other communities. Carnegie required that cities receiving his libraries agree to tax themselves annually at a rate of ten percent of the library's cost, and this requirement proved to be a considerable hurdle in several cities. Many residents, unfamiliar or unconcerned with public libraries, or satisfied

with the current facilities available to them, were not willing to prioritize supporting a new library building in perpetuity.

In fact, one of the only cases in which Carnegie waived the ten percent tax requirement was in the city of Homestead, Pennsylvania, site of the bloody 1892 strike in which several workers were killed by Carnegie's hired security guards. Carnegie himself was apologetic about the incident and disavowed prior knowledge of it. It can be assumed, however, that his decision both to build and endow the Homestead library and to waive the usual ten percent taxation requirement may have been something of a penance or at least an attempt to restore his reputation. His support for the New York Public Library is also presented as anomalous and possibly a bit cynical and self-serving. Carnegie's stated goal was to give his support to communities where libraries would not have been built without it. New York was not one of those, and the author offers a subtle suggestion that Carnegie's attention to New York was not completely altruistic.

Despite hints throughout the book (West Chicago, for example) it is not completely clear that resentment over Homestead was a major factor in many of the other communities where Carnegie attempted to fund libraries. Only in the cases of New Castle, Pennsylvania, and Oelwein, Iowa, do the authors make compelling cases that union activism was primarily responsible for defeating the funding referenda. In other cities (Beaumont, Texas; Pensacola, Florida; and Mobile, Alabama) the authors cite evidence of strenuous opposition from newspaper editors over the issue, but not necessarily from the citizens themselves (in the form of letters to the editor, for example). Despite its role in the genesis of the book and despite evidence presented in other sources, the Homestead Connection does not really hold up as a major factor in communities that refused Carnegie grants, at least based on the evidence presented in *Carnegie Denied*. Several of the contributors sometimes seem a bit too anxious to make the "tainted money" connection when the documentation cited does not

necessarily justify it. Interestingly, while there are several accounts throughout the book of complaints about building and funding “monuments” to Andrew Carnegie or reluctance to support a library building that bore his name, it is only mentioned in passing, near the end of the book that Carnegie in fact did not require that his name be placed on his library buildings at all.

What does emerge as a major factor in these refusals is the issue of funding. The geographic analysis presented in the New York chapter illustrates this; growing and booming communities were more likely to support Carnegie libraries, and strong union towns were no less likely than others to do so. The majority of the communities studied seem simply to have been unable to come to a consensus on making ongoing library funding a priority, a source of controversy even today. While perhaps not as “sexy” as the union issue, these findings are actually something of a hidden strength of *Carnegie Denied*, as they speak to modern issues as well as library history. As Martin notes in his conclusion, communities that already had libraries of some sort were less likely to agree to fund new ones, no matter the condition of the existing facilities. Citizens were ambivalent about taxation in general, and rural and working class residents (who had little free time to read and often lacked convenient access to the facility in question) and wealthier citizens (who had personal libraries of their own or at least some access to books) were reluctant to make libraries a higher priority than roads and parks. The author also notes, significantly, that in states like Missouri, state law made it difficult or impossible to add new taxes for libraries; any funding had to come at the expense of something else. Particularly interesting are the accounts of “bargaining” cities attempted (unsuccessfully) to do with Carnegie representatives in order to be relieved of part of the taxation requirement. It is in these anecdotes, though, that one of the primary weaknesses of using archival correspondence becomes apparent; it is never clear if responses from the corporation are simply missing or if some requests were just ignored out of hand.

As is noted in the chapter on southern cities, this funding issue was most likely a particularly big problem in the South, where education spending in general was not a priority and where the expense of maintaining dual, segregated school systems was also a factor. Unfortunately, the specific studies noted in the book do not really provide concrete evidence of this, although there is evidence presented in the introduction about the sad state of North Carolina's libraries relative to northern ones. Segregation is specifically mentioned in only one study, Pensacola, and even then only briefly. Presumably, there is more to this story than the archival material examined was able to demonstrate.

Another issue that may have merited further study is the divide between male and female support for libraries. Particularly in the case on the Missouri libraries, there is significant evidence of gender-based differences in support for libraries. The author notes that women's groups were instrumental in the establishment of libraries, and also that women voters were more likely to support library referenda than men. Since the period in which the Carnegie libraries were being built coincides with the final years of the women's suffrage movement, some analysis of how the absence or presence of women voters in each community might have been illuminating.

The narrative in *Carnegie Denied* suffers a bit from a very tight structure that makes the book read almost as if it had been created from a template or a series of database records. This is understandable to a degree, as it adds some consistency to the voices of seven distinct sets of authors, but the result is a somewhat predictable and repetitive narrative once past the first chapter. The weakness of using archival correspondence files as the predominant source, as noted above, also factors into this repetitiveness, although it is admittedly very difficult to "write around" the fact that a response to an important letter is either missing or nonexistent, especially when the distinction between the two has considerable implications.

In many ways, the title of the book suggests controversy and contentious debate, but surprisingly little of either is found inside. *Carnegie Denied* is primarily a story of small-town politics, questionable priorities, and occasional bureaucratic ineptitude. Antipathy toward Carnegie is largely relegated to the background. Even so, the book provides an interesting glimpse into historical thought processes that are not uncommon in smaller (and larger) communities even today, and it therefore provides useful context as well as simple historical interest.