

## Newnan Carnegie Library ~ Past & Future

On August 4, 1903, the cornerstone of the Carnegie Library and Auditorium was laid. A large assembly gathered to witness the impressive ceremonies, attesting to the importance of this event to Newnan. The cornerstone reads: LIBRARY - gift of ANDREW CARNEGIE - founded through the efforts of CHARLES L. THOMPSON - 1903. Quoting the *Herald and Advertiser*, August 7, 1903 regarding the remarkable life of Charles Longino Thompson:

...the young man who first conceived the idea that Newnan had climbed high enough up the rugged hill that leads to material prosperity and mental and moral culture to mark her as one of the cities where this philanthropist (Carnegie) could erect one of his buildings, and feel assured that her people would appreciate and sustain it, thus make it a perpetual joy and blessing; ---the young man whose unique personality secured this gift, and gave him power to persuade his fellow-citizens that they owed it to themselves and to those who shall come after them to accept it, with its accompanying conditions

Charles Longino Thompson, born June 1, 1880, to prominent, educated parents who lived at the corner of College and West Washington. As a boy he suffered a fall from a tree while trying to see if a bird's nest had eggs in it. His injuries resulted in his being confined to a "rolling chair" for rest of his life. He was undeterred, always optimistic, highly motivated and competitive in his studies even though he had become to frail to attend college. Perhaps he saw the Carnegie Library in Atlanta, built in 1898, while competing in a debate. On December 12, 1901, he wrote the following letter to Andrew Carnegie:

Dear Sir,

Our city desires to provide better for the higher life of its people, and we would like very much to interest you in our place. We have read with increasing admiration of your splendid philanthropy and already have in our section several illustrations of its practical results.

Newnan is a city of 6,500 people, an important manufacturing center and a large interior port for cotton. It has numerous municipal improvements, including waterworks, electric lights and an excellent public school system. Any educational institutions here would appeal to the interest of all the surrounding country.

We are very eager to erect a library and auditorium for Chatauqua purposes. The city has an excellent site, well located and would support them loyally. The Young Men's library here would turn their 3,000 volumes over to the city and the school library would be added to it, and we could begin with nearly 5,000 volumes.

The auditorium would be used to bring the best lecturers here and the people of four counties would attend the lectures.

Would you be willing to offer the city \$10,000 for the building if we agreed to furnish a suitable site and provide 10% of this sum annually for its maintenance? The people in addition would guarantee a sufficient sum to ensure the success of the Chautauqua.

Please let us here from you regarding this plan and precisely what conditions you would require of us. We will furnish all information desired as to effects of such an institution.

Yours sincerely, Chas L. Thompson % Newnan Banking Co.

*(and added almost as a P.S. the following:)*

I hereby approve above. A R Burdett Mayor City of Newnan, Ga

Andrew Carnegie agreed to this proposal by letter December 30, 1901. On January 22, 1902 Charles Thompson informed Mr. Carnegie that the Newnan City Council had unanimously agreed to accept his generous offer, and a board of seven trustees was appointed to assume control of the library. But Charles Thompson was never to see his dream of a “free library” realized. He immediately began going door to door in his “rolling chair” conducting a survey to better know what programs citizens of Newnan wanted their library provide. The cold wet January weather and his fragile health led to his contracting pneumonia. He died on January 30, at age 21, a few days after writing what was to be his last letter to Mr. Carnegie. Charles Thompson’s obituary in *The Herald and Advertiser* in part states:

“ . . .with his love for his fellow-citizens, he set to work with characteristic energy and perseverance to carry this idea (free library) into effect. But the physical strain of this work and the exposure encountered in prosecuting it, proved too much for his frail body, and just as he knew success had crowned his efforts, Death came and took him away. The library, the crystallized result of his labors, will be a source of wonderful good to his native city, and will stand as a memorial to his public-spiritedness and love for his fellow-man. But those who knew him, those familiar with his kindly voice and cheerful face, will need no memorial to remind them of his virtues. We know he must have longed for a more active life than his strength would permit, yet no one ever heard him utter a word of complaint.”

Charles Thompson is buried in Oak Hill Cemetery. His tombstone reads: Charles Longino Thompson, only son of B.T. and S.L. Thompson A great mind , a pure heart, a Christian Life

On August 22nd of that year, B.T. Thompson wrote Carnegie “The citizens of Newnan have subscribed money for an auditorium to be used exclusively as a Lyceum for educational purposes which they desire to construct as a second story of the library building which your recent generous donation has provided if it shall meet with your approval. Approval was given and on March 10, 1904 a photograph of the completed building was sent by Thompson. In his letter to Carnegie, he included this poignant statement, “You gave this library to Newnan, at the solicitation of my son, Charles L. Thompson. He died within a few weeks after receiving your generous offer. I have tried my best to carry out my son’s plans, and to see that the money should be invested in a suitable and substantial building. I shall continue to exert myself to build up a good library for Newnan.”

In the 1980s the Newnan Carnegie Library closed. A new county library, much larger, very modern, was built a distance from downtown. An institution that had been so close to the hearts of generations changed: the reading areas became a county courtroom, the auditorium became county offices, holding cells and ranks of miscreants filing through daily. In 2006, the county, with the city contributing funds, built a justice center and the court offices moved out. Once again, the Carnegie Library was empty. A group saw the opportunity to have a real Carnegie Library and formed “Friends of the Carnegie” hoping this venerable institution could be rescued, revitalized brought into a new century with opportunities for learning, all within walking distance of their homes. The “Friends of the Carnegie” contacted Dr. Shirley Spears, Director of the B.B. Comer Memorial Library, for assistance in determining which public library roles should be used in the survey for the Newnan Carnegie Library, which was widely distributed by members of Friends of the Carnegie.

Just as the survey 105 years ago told Charles Thompson, 105 years later, Friends of the Carnegie asking “what service do you want our library to provide?” found the same answer - the overwhelming need and desire of the people of Newnan remains: an auditorium with educational programs.