



# HISTORY, CULTURE, MEMORY, AND FUTURE

*a poem by Regie O'Hare Gibson*

*Celebrating 150 Years of Library Service!*

# History, Culture, Memory, and Future

*By Regie O'Hare Gibson*

*For Cary Memorial Library's 150th Anniversary  
Dedicated to Maria Hastings Cary and all who, over the  
decades, have and continue the work of maintaining this legacy.*

*Educate and inform the whole mass of the people... they are  
the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty.*

From Thomas Jefferson to Uriah Forrest, with Enclosure,  
31 December 1787

*If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization,  
it expects to what never was and never will be.*

Extract from Thomas Jefferson  
to Charles Yancey Monticello 6 January 1816

*Having a regard for my native place and wishing to  
promote its welfare by diffusing knowledge  
among its inhabitants, I desire to make through  
you the following proposition...  
A free public library open to all the inhabitants of the town...*

Maria Hastings Cary's letter to the Selectmen  
of Lexington 10 December, 1867

*I love this place!*

6, 11, 18, 25, 43 and 80 year old Lexington inhabitants -  
October and November- 2018

Welcome, Stranger. Friend. Booktraveler:  
You whose feet and fate have led you here.  
Know there are generations stitched in these stones—  
volumes of past voices heavy with history  
hovering in this very air you now breathe.

It began with words. With language.  
With human story, knowledge, and wisdom  
passed down from mouth to waiting ear  
until they flowed  
*like river ancient as the world and older than the flow  
of human blood in human veins.\**

It began like so many things begin—  
with a woman with a will that opens a door... a book ...a mind.  
With a woman with a need to plant a seed  
that would grow and blossom in a tomorrow  
she knew she'd never see. This is her legacy:

#### Cary Memorial Library

This place is no mere repository of aged page  
and leather bound book.

This is home to memory and culture, history and future  
(and asks that you travel through it, and look...)

Look at the young mouths with missing front teeth—  
mouths slacked agape at the flick of a fin's movement.

A race to the aquarium where nose and eyelash  
press against thick glass  
and mouths sound out the scientific names of fish.

Hear the scamper of legs excited for music or story-time.  
The exuberant *hellos* from and for librarians: those well-read  
bookjugglers tossing multitudes of titles in their heads—  
Virgilian guides joylistening to kids talking of what they've read—  
or, nostalgically smiling as they watch 6 year olds spread  
quietly on couches and cushions  
reading books *they* themselves loved as children.

See children leading each other, hand by hand  
through colorful columns of bookspines.

Pink t-shirts and cargo pants  
weaving and giggling through aisles.

Ponytails and pigtails, cowlicks, crewcuts  
and cornrows leaning into a mother  
as she reads aloud.

Her finger pointing to each syllable  
as small lips flex, stretch and round—  
practicing the spellsound of consonant and vowel.

Look— another young face soon to butterfly into knowledge!  
*There...* in the eyes...

see the mindwings emerging— beginning to unfold?!  
*That* is the alchemy that turns lead into gold—  
the magic that makes children see  
endless possibilities  
they impatiently wait for the rest of us to realize!

Yes, beneath this red-tiled roof—  
beneath this historic sky  
you will find a community of widened eyes.

Here is where teenagers gather into a live hive  
—abuzz with pizza and pimples. Braces and brash.

Listen to their fast-paced conversations— their whiplash  
of sentences exploding into paragraphs  
of adolescent laughter.

Witness how they self-create  
—help one another try and find their way  
in a world in which they often feel they have no place.

But, yet, they claim *this* place!

*This space...* they say, *is where we sanctuary.*  
*Where we can find what we need— even if we need nothing*  
*but to hang out and play games, talk, read, and center.*

*This is our place— Adult, please do not enter*  
*this part of our lives.*

*It's here we come to hide*  
*from the stress and the strife*  
*when the academic race seems so long—*  
*or, when we are told we've somehow been running it all wrong.*  
*This space is our escape from the discord of a world*  
*demanding we dance to its song—*

*We come here when we are exhausted and feel lost and alone*  
*and home has become a din of chaos and cacophony.*

*This is our place— where we can be with friends.*  
*Each of them an origamic complexity.*  
*Each of us an intricacy of legos seeking connections—*  
*curious as to what shapes*  
*we can make*  
*of ourselves.*

*This is our place!*

*The place where we sometimes—**must be.***  
*The place we want our future kids to come—*  
*so they can **just...be...***

Yes, this place of books is more than books.

It is memory and culture, history and future  
constantly igniting curiosity—  
fostering knowledge—  
creating community.

Move through, see its spirit embodied in the elder  
whose mind is vivid with the 1940's.  
Vivid with his father bringing him here  
to read him stories before heading to work  
because he knew he would not be back home in time  
to tuck him in.

His father, doing all the characters voices  
while he, a 5-year old child, giggled  
at how his father's accent colored every word— *Irish*.

It is embodied in a grandmother  
recalling the late 1950's.  
When she, a Catholic teenage girl,  
fell in love with a Jewish boy...  
a love that, at the time, could not be.

It is her eyes, glistening as she tells  
how they sat together  
held hands beneath wooden tables  
and explored first kisses

between book-lined shelves sheltered  
from the orthodox eyes of synagogue and church.

It is door to door delivery to the housebound  
— to those who cannot walk or drive.  
Bringing braille or the recorded word to the blind  
— or those whose eyes have clouded  
but who can now crawl inside the human voice  
and return to an ancient time when our ancestors  
told tales that strengthened and bound us into tribe.

*This place is a blessing! They say.  
Our doorway to the world! They say.  
Without it we'd be in an awful state—  
unable to participate in intellectual life.*

*This library is a happiness.*

Move through— open yourself and hear the new  
— the recent immigrant or refugee  
bringing their various linguistic richnesses:

*Sanskrit and Hebrew, Mandarin and Telugu,  
Tamil and Russian, Arabic and Greek,  
German, Bengali, Korean, Marathi,  
Hindi, Italian, French and Portuguese,  
Turkish, Swedish, Taiwanese,  
Finnish, Spanish and Vietnamese...*

Each adding their voices and stories and songs to this rare air  
we breathe.

Continue through— see that couple  
that first came here with their children in 1972—  
who, since becoming empty-nesters and moving away,  
come back to donate books because of that librarian  
who, long ago, welcomed and treated them  
with such kindness— the first of many.

Listen to the Desk-gossipers— patrons at checkout  
joining in librarians' conversations and becoming fast friends.

Listen to the mothers that walk here  
on mornings to talk here  
after their kids have gone off to school—  
mothers desperately in need of adult conversation  
about anything  
(except parenting, kids, or school).

Chance into discussions at the book store  
on politics and science, Emerson and self-reliance,  
Shakespeare, history, cooking, interesting biographies  
that will change and challenge the way you see things  
as knowledge bursts against the mind's nighttime  
like fireworks on the 4th of July.

Notice the middle aged woman studying  
for her college degree. Her mechanical pencil,  
a yellow blur as she highlights passages and scribbles  
marginalia.

See the man in mid-career brushing up his CV  
and searching newspaper and internet for job opportunities.

The retired teacher with stacks of books  
he uses to tutor those who want their G.E.D.  
so they can aspire— aim higher.

And, see her, who grew up  
having only had access to a mobile library  
that came by her school every 6-8 weeks.

And, now, sits in an aisle in the poetry  
section surrounded by verse—  
her thin legs crossed, her brain soaring  
through vistas of imagination  
even as she angles how to take home  
more poems than she can possibly carry.

*This place holds a special place in my heart.  
She says... It's like a gift from heaven.*

Whether of no religion or devoted to church, mosque or temple  
here, at Cary Memorial Library, we are all People of the Book—  
all, potential pilgrims taking part in a journey

to bring a community, a nation, a democratic republic  
to its higher transcendent civic self where all can stand in the light  
of our most sacred and self-evident truths.

But, this place did not happen on its own.  
Did not grow on its own.  
Did not become what it has become on its own.

It is what *it* is because of those who *are* who *they* are...

Because of decades of citizens serving in silence.  
Unknown, unnamed, unsung volunteers  
who give, mind, heart, hands, and countless hours—  
meeting in small rooms to launch big ideas.

Cart pushers stocking shelves,  
fund-raisers and book-sales,  
multi-generational donors and endowments,  
Friends, Foundation Members and Trustees  
closely watching how every dime gets spent.

And, because of custodial caretakers toiling nightly—  
putting in a light-bulb, turning a wrench,  
fixing what needs fixing,  
handling brooms, mops and pails,  
taking great care to muscle things clean for the morning.

All of this is the slow work—  
the *you'll never know* work.  
The unglorified, mean work  
the often unnoticed and unseen work  
of those that daily endeavor to uphold the scaffolding  
that holds this place we all love, together.

Cary Memorial Library

Yes, its location and appearance may change.  
Shelves will be moved.  
Books renumbered, reordered, and rearranged  
as information technologies inevitably push forward into  
new terrain.

But, its mission, as ever, will be the same:

To remain a vibrant expression of Lexington life—  
Strengthened by Memory. Preserving of Culture.  
Rooted in History. Stretching toward the Future.  
Growing with and adjusting to the ever-evolving needs  
of Lexingtonians that we, today, will never see  
or know.

But, through this legacy...  
will know us through what we will will them:

Cary Memorial Library

This place where knowledge, learning and intellectual  
democracy have a home.

May one day its future air hang heavy with volumes of *our* voices.  
May one day *this* generation be stitched in these stones.

*Regie O'Hare Gibson*

\* Line taken from the poem The Negro Speaks of Rivers by  
Langston Hughes

***History, Culture, Memory, and Future*** is an original composition commissioned in honor of the Cary Memorial Library's 150th Anniversary by the Library Board of Trustees. The piece is the work of Regie O'Hare Gibson, a Lexington resident, educator, literary performer, and the library's first Poet in Residence. To create it, he hosted office hours in the library where he listened to people's stories - about this library and others they have loved.

The piece was performed twice by Mr. Gibson: first, at a community celebration on January 27, 2019 – 150 years to the day the first public library opened in Lexington, Massachusetts – and again on March 23, 2019, at the 150th Anniversary Gala hosted by the Cary Memorial Library Foundation.

Koren Stembridge  
Library Director

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**Cary Memorial Library**

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