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**“A SUBSTANTIAL AND ATTRACTIVE BUILDING”:  
THE CARNEGIE PUBLIC LIBRARY,  
SUMTER, SOUTH CAROLINA**

RUTH J. EDENS\*

IN 1881 ANDREW CARNEGIE, THE STEEL TYCOON, BEGAN A program of benevolence which dramatically changed the prospects for libraries in the English-speaking world. Carnegie was born in Scotland in 1835, the son of a hand-loom weaver who emigrated to America in 1845. At thirteen young Carnegie went to work as a bobbin boy in a Pittsburgh textile mill for \$2.50 a week. He worked himself up and into the Pennsylvania Railroad and from there into the iron-forging business, establishing the Carnegie Steel Corporation which he sold in 1901 to J. P. Morgan for almost \$500 million.<sup>1</sup>

Carnegie had begun making plans for the distribution of his wealth in 1868 when he was thirty-three. After his death, a memorandum found among his papers stated his plans:

Thirty-three and an income of \$550,000 per annum! By this time two years I can so arrange all my business as to secure at least \$550,000 per annum. Beyond this never earn — make no effort to increase fortune but spend the surplus each year for benevolent purposes. Cast aside business forever except for others.<sup>2</sup>

Carnegie formally announced his philosophy of wealth in 1889 in an article entitled “Wealth” published in *The North American Review*. The article, republished many times, has become known as “the Gospel of Wealth.” It states that those who possess surplus fortunes do not have a moral right to their wealth; because they have been gained by the people as a whole, they belong to all. According to Carnegie, it is the duty of the wealthy man to provide adequately for his family, then to dispose of his surplus in ways that will best aid in the well-being and happiness of others.<sup>3</sup>

\*Freelance writer of social history residing in Dalzell, South Carolina. This article is an outgrowth of a paper entitled “Library Facilities in Sumter South Carolina 1809-1990.”

<sup>1</sup>George Bobinski, *Carnegie Libraries: Their History and Impact on American Public Library Development* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1969), pp 9, 10.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p.10.

<sup>3</sup>Burton J. Hendrick, *Miscellaneous Writings of Andrew Carnegie, Volume Two* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday Doan and Co., 1933.), p. 125.

what determination and resourcefulness — aided by good fortune — could accomplish against formidable odds.”<sup>58</sup>

The victory at Grahamville came at a time in the war when the Confederates virtually had been defeated. It was a splendid triumph for Southerners. Its glorification gave their morale as well as their pride a boost, even though defeat lurked within. The rebel victory at Honey Hill released Savannah from imminent danger and allowed the Charleston and Savannah Railroad to remain a Confederate artery just a few weeks longer. Had the United States Army disrupted the railroad or perhaps achieved a permanent lodgement on the line, it would have been extremely difficult for the Savannah garrison to have retreated in that direction a few days later. Hence, the Confederate victory at Honey Hill may have saved all or part of the force of several thousand soldiers who were to be part of the subsequent resistance to General Sherman in the Carolinas.

<sup>58</sup>Bragg, “An Incident of the Savannah Campaign,” p. 19.

In an essay entitled "The Best Use of Wealth," Carnegie gave his reasons for choosing to aid in the founding of libraries: "The taste for reading is one of the most precious possessions of life.... I should much rather be instrumental in bringing to the working man or woman this taste than mere dollars."<sup>4</sup>

Carnegie donated his first library in 1881 to Dunfermline, Scotland, his birthplace. He gave his first American library to Allegheny, Pennsylvania, his first American home. During his early years of library giving, 1881-1910, Carnegie handled the granting of funds personally, with help from his secretary, James Bertram. After the establishment of the Carnegie Foundation in 1911, Carnegie kept in close touch, but Bertram, as secretary of the corporation, directed the library program alone.<sup>5</sup>

The few requirements for receiving donations for libraries were usually easy to comply with, but Carnegie and Bertram were unyielding in their demand that these requisites be satisfied. First, all communications and business concerning the request had to be sent by mail. Second, Carnegie and Bertram preferred dealing directly with the town or city rather than with a library board or other organization. They also required an official commitment from the mayor or city council stating what the community was prepared to do in regards to a building site and operational funds. Third, the building must be used solely for library purposes. Fourth, the library building had to meet certain specifications, and architectural plans had to be approved by Bertram before any Carnegie commitment was made. These criteria had to be met by every town which applied, regardless of its size.<sup>6</sup>

**IN AMERICA AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY THERE WERE FEW** tax-supported public libraries. Local, state, and federal governments had not accepted their responsibilities for providing libraries, and few communities, especially in the South, could afford the investment necessary to build and stock a library. Between 1889 and 1917, the Carnegie Corporation was responsible for the construction of 1,679 libraries in the United States. Of these, fourteen were in South Carolina, located in Anderson, Beaufort, Camden, Charleston, Darlington, Gaffney, Greenwood, Honea Path, Kingstree, Latta, Marion, Spartanburg, Sumter, and Union.<sup>7</sup>

All of the South Carolina Carnegie grants were made during a period of fourteen years, from 1903 through 1916. Though they bear a striking

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>5</sup>Bobinski, *Carnegie Libraries*, pp. 9, 12, and 13; Florence Anderson, *Carnegie Corporation Library Programs* (New York: Carnegie Corporation, 1963), pp. 3 and 4.

<sup>6</sup>Bobinski, *Carnegie Libraries*, pp. 35, 38, 43, 57.

<sup>7</sup>Anderson, *Carnegie Corporation Library Programs*, p. 58. The total was obtained by adding the figures from each state in charts on pp. 25-68.

resemblance to each other on both the exterior and the interior, they were not built according to Carnegie-dictated blueprints; however the Carnegie Corporation did have a great deal of input into plans for the buildings it funded. During the early years of library giving, Carnegie placed no restrictions on library plans. A community designed and built its library according to its own tastes and needs. As early as 1902 Carnegie expressed displeasure with the plans of some libraries. Bertram, concerned that there was much waste in library construction, conferred with architects and experienced librarians and arrived at some general specifications for Carnegie-funded libraries. These, with sample floor plans, were printed in a memorandum, "Notes on the Erection of Library Buildings" and were sent to each community applying for funds.<sup>8</sup> (Bertram had his own personal mode of spelling. All correspondence from Bertram used in this article is printed just as he wrote it. The unorthodox spelling is his.) In this guide Bertram explained:

Some architects are liable, unconsciously, no doubt, to aim at architectural features and to subordinate useful accommodation. Some are also apt, on account of a lack of practical knowledge of the administration of a library, to plan interiors which are entirely unsuited for the purposes of a free public library. Small libraries should be planned so that one librarian can oversee the entire library from a central position.<sup>9</sup>

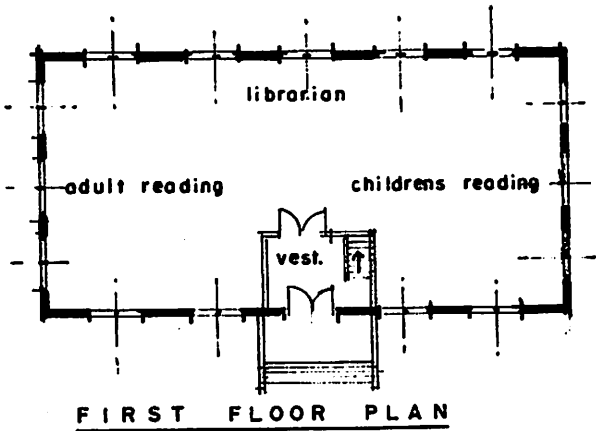
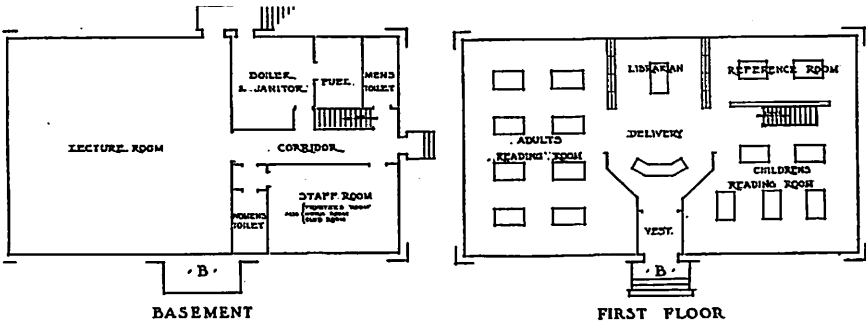
Bertram suggested six floor plans but seemed to prefer one. He wrote, "Experience seems to show that the best results for a small general library are obtained by adopting the one story and basement rectangular type building, with a small vestibule entering into one large room."<sup>10</sup> This plan is shown on the next page. A comparison of it with the present floor plan of the Sumter Carnegie, which has not been altered, reveals the similarity. Both the Latta and Camden libraries and probably others in South Carolina also used this plan.

Though they may have used this design, the South Carolina libraries were of varying sizes, in keeping with their costs, which ranged from \$5,000 to \$18,700. The Latta and Camden buildings, each of which received \$5,000, contained on their main floors 804 square feet and 936 square feet respectively. The Sumter facility, costing \$10,000, contained 1,500 square feet of main-floor space. These three libraries also had similar experiences with the Carnegie approval process. The time from the date of application to the date

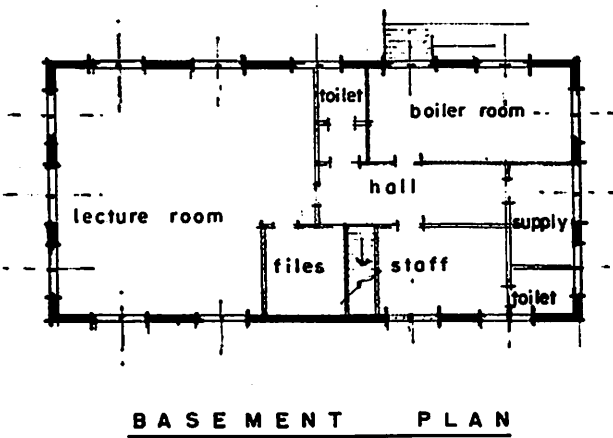
<sup>8</sup>Anderson, *Carnegie Corporation Library Programs*, p 58.

<sup>9</sup>"Notes on the Erection of Library Buildings," p 1. The original of this document is in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library of the Columbia University Library.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.



In his memorandum, "Notes on the Erection of Library Buildings," James Bertram suggested six possible library floorplans. The design above, the "B" design, is very similar to the actual floorplan of the Sumter Carnegie (left and below left), drawn by architect Charles McCreight of Demosthenes and McCreight. The plan above is printed with the permission of the Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.



of approval in each case was less than one year. While all three were approved after 1910, libraries which applied before Bertram required the approval of building plans did not necessarily receive funding any faster. Spartanburg applied on April 20, 1903, for \$15,000 and was granted approval January 17, 1904, almost eight months later.<sup>11</sup> In each case, Bertram and the Carnegie Corporation required an exchange of information which assured them that the town would "obtain the utmost effective accommodation, consistent with good taste in bilding."<sup>12</sup>

**A CONSIDERATION OF SUMTER RESIDENTS' EXPERIENCE ESTABLISHING** their library and how they gained approval for construction funds suggests the details for the Carnegie process that other libraries encountered. The Sumter economy at the time was agrarian, with cotton, timber, and tobacco as the principle cash crops. It was not situated on a river, and though railroad lines ran through town, it was not a major rail center; industry was slow in coming, and the few manufacturing plants in operation did not employ a large number of people. Sumter in 1916 had been in existence for 116 years. Its population at the time of the 1910 census was 8,109. Of these, 3,988 were white and 4,125 were black.<sup>13</sup> The 1920 census showed a total population of 9,508, a little more than a 17-percent increase over the 1910 total.<sup>14</sup> Sumter was growing steadily, but it was not growing rapidly;<sup>15</sup> however, its small size and lack of wealth did not dampen the progressive spirit of its citizens.

In governmental, civic, and cultural affairs, a number of Sumter residents were progressive and civic minded. Through their efforts, despite the slow economic growth, Sumter was experiencing notable civic and community development. In 1910 Sumter had become the first city in the nation to adopt a council-city manager form of government, and in 1911 the Sumter Chamber of Commerce, which had been active earlier, was reorganized.<sup>16</sup>

Tuomey Hospital, a modern public hospital, was established in 1913

<sup>11</sup>John B. Cleveland to James Bertram, May 15, 1903; James Bertram to John B. Cleveland, Jan. 17, 1904; Spartanburg Library Papers, mcfm., Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Columbia University Library, New York, N. Y.

<sup>12</sup>"Notes on the Erection of Library Buildings," p. 1.

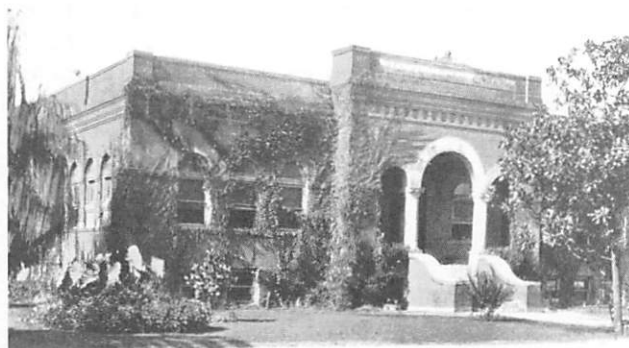
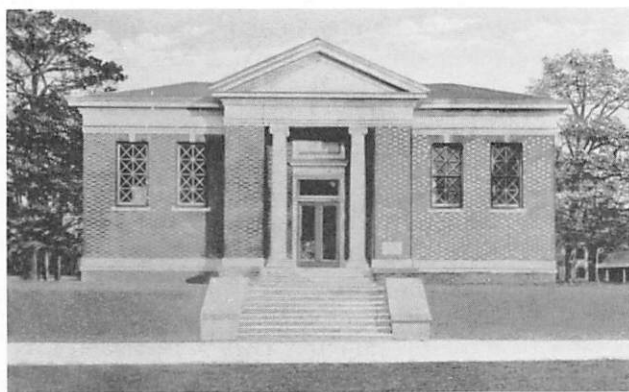
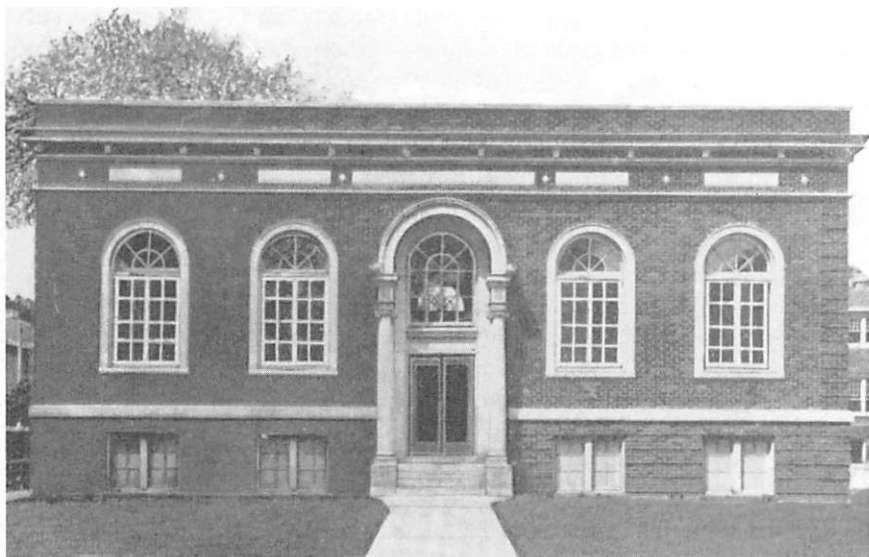
<sup>13</sup>Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Supplement For South Carolina, Table IV, U. S. Bureau of the Census, p. 600.

<sup>14</sup>Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Volume III, Population, Table 11, U. S. Bureau of the Census, p. 935.

<sup>15</sup>For the same period, based on the census figures for 1910 and 1920, the town of Spartanburg, a growing industrial town, experienced a 23 percent increase in population. Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Table 10, p. 934.

<sup>16</sup>Ann King Gregorie, *History of Sumter County* (Sumter, S.C.: Library Board of Sumter County, 1954) p.405.





Fourteen of the 1,679 libraries funded by the Carnegie Foundation were built in South Carolina.

Above, the Sumter Carnegie.

Left, the Camden Carnegie.

Left below, the Spartanburg Carnegie.

All images are from postcards in the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.

when two private hospitals were consolidated.<sup>17</sup> Sumter was especially attuned to the needs of its young people. An active Young Men's Christian Association had been established in 1910 and within a year had begun construction on a three-story brick building which contained dormitories, a swimming pool, and a gymnasium.<sup>18</sup>

Like most South Carolina communities fifty years after the close of the Civil War, Sumter was still working to rebuild its economic and cultural foundations. Early in the twentieth century, general interest in developing library programs was evident throughout the state. This interest paralleled an active building program of public schools in South Carolina. As better schools were built, the need for library facilities became imperative. This was seen clearly in Sumter. When the public-school system moved into a new building in 1892, the City School Board immediately realized the need for making library facilities accessible to students. On October 2, 1902, Chairman E. C. Haynsworth appointed a committee to investigate the possibility of interesting Andrew Carnegie in a "Public library for Sumter, to which some school rooms might be added."<sup>19</sup> No further record of this action has been found in school-board minutes, and the Carnegie Corporation has no record of receiving this request. Nevertheless, the idea was not abandoned. During the early 1900s the Sumter Civic League, a group of women interested in improving the quality of life for the citizens of Sumter, opened a library in a one-room cottage on Liberty Street between Washington and Main streets.

Julia Reynolds, who was a young girl at the time, remembers riding her bicycle to this library. Following her graduation from college, Miss Reynolds served as librarian of Sumter's Carnegie Public Library from the summer of 1919 until the summer of 1920. Civic League members donated books, funds, and much time to the library; they solicited the same from fellow citizens and sponsored a variety of fund-raising events, but their ambitions for the library were greater than their resources. They approached City Council with the request that the city pay \$15.00 each month to help defray the expenses of operating their library and to enable them to keep the library open longer hours. The ladies agreed to add at least \$60.00 worth of books annually, to continue to manage the library, and to keep it open to the free use of the public. City Council agreed to the proposal with the understanding that it was only a trial and reserved the right to discontinue the monthly payments if the plan did not work to their satisfaction.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 490.

<sup>18</sup>"YMCA: A Sumter Institution," *Sumter Daily Item*, Oct. 15, 1969.

<sup>19</sup>"Minutes: City Board of Education, 1894-1915," Oct. 2, 1902, Archives of Sumter School District 17, Sumter, S.C.

<sup>20</sup>"Minutes: Sumter City Council," May 14, 1915, City Council Offices Sumter, S.C.

Apparently the arrangement worked well, for in September of that year Mrs. Irving A. Ryttenberg, chairperson of the Library Committee for the league, reported that from June 1 to October 12, 2,512 books were loaned and 386 persons were members. In June \$15.00 was invested in books and the group planned to invest another \$20.00 in November.<sup>21</sup>

During this time, officials were again considering approaching Andrew Carnegie. On April 23, 1915, Superintendent of Schools Samuel H. Edmunds wrote Carnegie, "I am taking advantage of Shakespeare's birthday to write to you with reference to a public library for Sumter in connection with our system of public schools."<sup>22</sup> This letter began a lengthy correspondence between Sumter officials (principally Edmunds) and Carnegie officials (principally Bertram).

At the time of the Sumter correspondence, Andrew Carnegie no longer took an active part in the affairs of the corporation; however, he was very close to his secretary, Bertram, who was especially sensitive to the intentions of Carnegie, and held steadfast to the benefactor's precepts. Correspondence with the corporation reveals Bertram's personal contribution to the program as well as a little of his personality. A man of few words, his communications were short and concise, sometimes even a bit brusque with a hint of impatience. His letters were peppered with his own form of abbreviated spelling, which seems to have been his trademark. Bertram's response to Edmunds' initial letter (April 23) is a good example of his style:

May 5th, 1915

Dear Sir:

Yours receivd. If Sumter, South Carolina, has not adequate library accommodation and desires the assistance of Carnegie Corporation of New York in obtaining a bilding, those interested should hav the Mayor and Council make application, stating what the community is willing to do for its part.<sup>23</sup>

Brief and to the point, Bertram's letter establishes at the outset of the correspondence two very important requirements of the Carnegie Corporation: the mayor and city council must make the application, and they must state what the community plans to do to support the library.

Bertram was not being unreasonably contentious in insisting that the corporation deal with city officials. Carnegie wanted to be sure not only that the entire community wanted a library, but that it was also prepared to

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., Oct. 12, 1915.

<sup>22</sup>Edmunds to Carnegie, Apr. 23, 1915, Carnegie Corporation Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University (hereafter Carnegie Papers).

<sup>23</sup>Bertram to Carnegie, Apr. 23, 1915, Carnegie Papers.

support it with tax money.<sup>24</sup> The extent to which the community intended to maintain the facility was a determining factor in deciding the amount to be given. Carnegie was adamant in demanding that the community provide an annual maintenance agreement of 10 percent of the total amount the corporation gave.<sup>25</sup>

Two months elapsed before Sumter officials responded to Bertram's letter. On July 14, 1915, Superintendent Edmunds wrote:

The City Board of Education and the Mayor and City Council have authorized me to make to the Carnegie Corporation the following proposal:

I: The Board of Education has just purchased a lot at the center of population for educational purposes, for which the price of \$15,000.00 was paid. The Board proposes to give one third of this frontage, i. e. \$5,000, to be used for the erection of a library building;

II: The Mayor and City Council propose to bind in perpetuity the city government to an annual donation of \$1,000.00 for the maintenance of the library;

III: The ladies of the Civic League will undertake to get the books. They have already a promising nucleus.<sup>26</sup>

Upon receipt of this letter, Bertram responded and enclosed, "a scedule which should be fild in and signd by the Mayor and City Clerk."<sup>27</sup> One of these schedules was sent to each community requesting a library. It asked the town's population and whether or not the town had a library. If a library existed, the schedule asked the number of books it contained, the circulation for the past year, how it was housed, the number and measurements of the rooms and their uses. Questions were also asked about the amount City Council pledged for annual support and the required building site.<sup>28</sup>

Sumter officials promptly completed their form, reporting the existing Civic League Library with 1,000 books which "was made public during the year and at once became so popular as to show the need of a public library on a large scale."<sup>29</sup>

When the schedule was received by the Carnegie Corporation, Bertram acknowledged its receipt and informed Edmunds by mail on July 30, 1915, that the Sumter request would be considered at the next meeting of the

<sup>24</sup>Bobinski, *Carnegie Libraries*, p. 38.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>26</sup>Edmunds to Bertram, July 14, 1915, Carnegie Papers.

<sup>27</sup>Bertram to Edmunds, July 20, 1915, Carnegie Papers.

<sup>28</sup>From a copy of the original form sent to Sumter officials, Carnegie Papers.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*

corporation, scheduled for late September.<sup>30</sup>

The long-awaited letter arrived in Sumter in early October. Bertram wrote:

Responding to your communication on behalf of Sumter, South Carolina, if the City agrees by resolution of Council to maintain a Free Public Library at a cost of One thousand Dollars (\$1,000) a year, and provides a suitable site for the bilding, Carnegie Corporation of New York wil be glad to giv Ten thousand Dollars (\$10,000) for a Library Bilding for Sumter, South Carolina.

It should be noted that the amount indicated is to cover the cost of the Library Bilding complete, redy for occupance and for the purpos intended.

Before any expenditure on bilding or plans is incurd, the approval of proposed plans by Carnegie Corporation of New York must be secured, to obtain which pleas send tentativ plans for inspection.<sup>31</sup>

The City Board of Education and Sumter City Council met on October 7, 1915, and members were informed of the letter from the Carnegie Corporation. School-board members confirmed their previous commitment to donate the building site from the recently acquired property adjoining Academy Square on which Washington and Hampton schools stood.<sup>32</sup> City Council adopted the form of resolution which had been sent by Bertram, and before the meeting adjourned, "A Resolution to Accept the Donation of the Carnegie Corporation of New York" was signed, notarized, and made ready for its return to New York.<sup>33</sup>

The first phase of the founding of a Carnegie Library in Sumter had been completed. In the final paragraph of his letter of September 29, Bertram opened up the next phase of negotiations between town officials and the Carnegie Corporation, the approval of building plans.

Bertram was no less particular in approving library plans than he was in approving funding. Evidence of his dedication to achieving an efficient plan, which provided the largest possible amount of book and reading space as economically as possible, can be seen in his correspondence with Sumter officials.

<sup>30</sup>Bertram to Edmunds, July 30, 1915, Carnegie Papers.

<sup>31</sup>Bertram to Edmunds, Sept. 29, 1915, Carnegie Papers.

<sup>32</sup>"Minutes: City Board of Education, Apr. 14, 1915-June 6, 1930," Oct. 7, 1915, Archives of Sumter School District 17, Sumter, S.C.

<sup>33</sup>"Minutes, Sumter City Council," Oct. 7, 1915, City Council offices, Sumter, South Carolina.

In his letter of September 29 Bertram enclosed a copy of "Notes on the Erection of a Library Bilding." He also instructed Sumter officials that, "Plans should be submitted in the form of blueprints or similar rolls," and he did not want any plans or sketches "mounted on cardboard." He further insisted that "all communications should come from civic authorities; we do not wish to correspond with architects."<sup>34</sup>

Sumter City Council relinquished all library planning duties to the City Board of Education. That group selected the firm of Walker and Johnson as architects for the building.<sup>35</sup> On January 6, 1916 architect J. Herbert Johnson, of Sumter, and his partner, N. Gaillard Walker, of Rock Hill, South Carolina, presented tentative blueprints for the proposed library. The structure consisted of a basement and main floor planned to hold about 10,000 volumes. The building was to be constructed of hollow tile with brick veneer and would have terra-cotta trimming.<sup>36</sup>

These plans were approved by the Library Committee and mailed to the Carnegie Corporation the same day. However, the library plans were not acceptable to Bertram, and on January 11, he returned them to Sumter with a note which said:

Your favor of January 6th and plans receivd. These will not do however, rather than go into details I beg you refer to our memorandum on library bilding which accompanied the promis, which shows what to aim at and what to avoid in drawing plans.<sup>37</sup>

Though Bertram was not specific about the changes he desired, on January 27 Johnson submitted what he described as "another scheme for the proposed library,"<sup>38</sup> and Edmunds promptly mailed the plans to Bertram.

On February 4 the plans were again returned, accompanied by one of Bertram's longest letters to date, which cited various faults he found with the plans. Among the changes he wanted were the lowering of the ceiling by two feet, moving the toilets, moving the janitor's room, and reducing the storage area.<sup>39</sup>

Once again Johnson changed the design and resubmitted the plans on February 17. Edmunds returned them to Bertram stating, "I hope the architects have rightly interpreted your instructions through me."<sup>40</sup>

<sup>34</sup>Bertram to Edmunds, Sept. 29, 1915, Carnegie Papers.

<sup>35</sup>"Minutes: City Board of Education Apr. 14, 1915-June 30, 1949," Oct. 20, 1916, Archives of Sumter School District 17, Sumter, S.C.

<sup>36</sup>Johnson to Edmunds, Jan. 6, 1916, Carnegie Papers.

<sup>37</sup>Bertram to Edmunds, Jan. 11, 1916, Carnegie Papers.

<sup>38</sup>Johnson to Edmunds, Jan. 27, 1916, Carnegie Papers.

<sup>39</sup>Bertram to Edmunds, Feb. 4, 1916, Carnegie Papers.

<sup>40</sup>Edmunds to Bertram, Feb. 17, 1916, Carnegie Papers.