

# A Legacy of Accessibility

More than a century ago, industrialist Andrew Carnegie funded free libraries to promote literacy. You can visit several right here in Wisconsin.

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THERE ONCE WAS A TIME when our oligarchs, instead of taking joyrides into space or buying private islands, occasionally did something magnanimous with their money. Take the Scottish-born steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, who donated \$56 million to construct more than 2,500 public libraries across the U.S. from 1886 to 1922. (That's more than \$2 billion in today's dollars.) Some of these institutions remain, welcoming visitors to browse or take in their homages to the past. Flip back the pages of history with a visit to five of Wisconsin's unique Carnegie-funded spaces.



The only Carnegie library you can still visit in the area, the Waukesha library doesn't, at first glance, look that old, as additions and renovations have transformed the 1903 building. But step inside, and you'll find the original structure preserved in the form of the Carnegie Room. Once the entire library, the room now holds collections on local history and genealogy, while a fireplace creates a cozy place to dig into the spot. 321 Wisconsin Ave., [waukeshapubliclibrary.org](http://waukeshapubliclibrary.org) While it's named for its earliest benefactor, Merrill's first mayor, the library didn't have its own home until Carnegie's gift, which yielded this handsome Prairie School design on a bend in the Prairie

River. It's unlikely that many Wisconsin libraries have done more to affirm Carnegie's belief that a library is the best gift one can give a community. In 1905, the Merrill library became the state's first to offer English classes to foreign residents and it has twice been named the state library of the year. 106 W. First St., [tbscottlibrary.org](http://tbscottlibrary.org)

Carnegie's \$50,000 donation in 1901 built this Renaissance Revival-style home for the city's main library branch. After the library outgrew its home and moved in the late '50s, the original building assumed its current purpose, housing displays exploring the county's history, from the rise and fall of the Mitchell automobile company to the glory days of the Racine Belles, inaugural champions of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League. 701 Main St., [racineheritagemuseum.org](http://racineheritagemuseum.org)

When the Antigo chapter of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union began agitating for a library in 1894, its argument was that "the free circulation of good books in the community would be a counter-attraction to the saloon." Three years later they got their wish, and several years

after that, the library got its own home. Although the building is now a museum, much of its masonry, woodwork and other features remain unchanged. In addition to the museum displays, you can view an early 20th-century steam locomotive and a log cabin built by Antigo's founder on the grounds. 404 Superior St., [langladehistory.org](http://langladehistory.org)

That this is Wisconsin's oldest Carnegie library that still functions as such feels appropriate. Sparta was one of the state's first communities to establish a free public library, doing so at a time when most libraries were private and charged borrowing fees.

The circa-1902 neoclassical structure is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and, while recently renovated, you can still see the original bronze fireplace and arched windows in its historic Carnegie section. 124 W. Main St., [spartalibrary.org](http://spartalibrary.org)