

# A Library With No Books: The Haskell Free Library & Opera House

*Susan Redmond*

A Google search for famous libraries will reveal such well-known places as Assurbanipal's library at Nineveh, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris or even the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford. These libraries receive hundreds, if not thousands of visitors a year, who will come to admire the architecture and ambience of these buildings. What is not as well known is that there is an equally intriguing library here in North America. Located on the border of Canada and the United States is a library that is not as well known but which represents the "peaceful co-existence" of two great nations.

The Haskell Free Library and Opera House was built at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The project was conceived and carried out by Martha Haskell and her son, Horace. When Martha's husband Carlos, a prominent business man, died, Martha wanted to create a monument in his memory. Being a Canadian by birth, Martha decided a cultural centre would benefit both countries. Knowing that two separate buildings would be impractical, she built the structure to straddle the border, something that would not be allowed today since the "International Boundary Commission banned [all] construction on the border in 1925".

The actual building is located in Derby Line, Vermont and Rock Island, Quebec. The entrance for the library is on the Vermont side of the border. Typically if a border is crossed there is a requirement to report to customs, but the Haskell Free Library and Opera House is located in what both governments refer to as "no-man's land", so library users are allowed unfettered access to the facility as long as they park in the appropriate country. This means that Canadian patrons park on the Canadian side of the building and walk to the American entrance.

The actual layout of the building is quite unique. The entrance of the building is located in Vermont while the back door is located in Canada. The main lobby and library offices are located in the Vermont section of the building, while the check-out desk and main stacks are located on the Canadian side of the library. As a result the Haskell Free Library is often referred to as the only library in America that does not have books. In the late 1990s the charitable organization that runs the library had a black line painted on the floor to represent the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel. This was done to attract more tourist interest in the building.

The Haskell Free Library is the model of duality. It has a Canadian and American street address. There are "two separate payrolls

maintained – one for U.S. and one for Canadian employees”. Fines for the library are accepted in Canadian or American dollars. There are two oil tanks installed in the basement, one on the Canadian side and one on the American. This allows the library to buy its heating fuel from the cheapest source, a choice that is also made with the electricity. But the most striking of all is that the library functions in “two official languages – English and French”.

The library has a collection of approximately 30,000 books, 20% of which are French-language titles. Of those who use the library “30% are English speaking Canadians [while] 20% are French Quebecois”. The other half of the regular users are from Vermont. Some, if not all, of the librarians are bilingual.

The library is open 5 days a week all year. This library does not have an on-line catalogue, but rather still uses the old card catalogue system. According to Nancy Rumery, the assistant librarian, the only users who have a problem with this are the children who are unfamiliar with such old technology. What is interesting is that none of the librarians have an M.L.S. degree, “although all employees have received advance training in library operations”. According to Rumery this is not unusual in the state of Vermont as it “has the most libraries per capita of any state”. As the library is located in a small town in the rural part of Vermont where the population is low, Rumery feels that a “lack of M.L.S. is not a hindrance” to the day to day operations of the library.

When Martha Haskell died she stipulated in her will that the Haskell Free Library and Opera House be donated to the community, but only on the understanding that “no taxes [were to] be paid to either country”. Ultimately the opera house did not support the library which had been Martha’s original intention. To help facilitate this, a private endowment fund was set up by the Haskell family to support the building and the library.

The annual budget for the library is \$150,000.00 with some small contributions being made by the state and provincial library funds of Vermont and Quebec. In the 1990s “the charitable foundation that owns the facility decided to turn it into a tourist attraction.” This resulted in the need to renovate the building to bring it up to current standards. The “\$1-million project was funded largely by grants from the Canadian, U.S., Quebec and Vermont governments, as well as [local] municipalities.”

Martha Haskell's original intent for the building was as a "gesture of heartfelt friendship" for the two communities and countries that had touched her life. Ultimately, however, the Haskell Free Library and Opera House has become, as one of its librarians put it, "one of the best tangible examples of good international relations anywhere in the world".

*Susan Redmond's primary interests are public libraries and bookselling.*



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