

HISTORIC HAVENS

BY LORI DRAZ

THE OCEANIC FREE LIBRARY 1920 TO 2020

SPECIAL THANKS TO CAROLYN MILLER,
ROBERTA VAN ANDA AND WILL MORRISEY

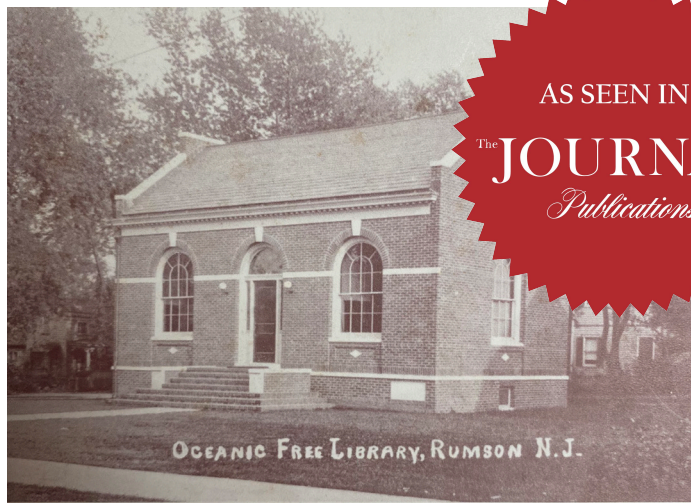
This is a special year for Rumson's Oceanic Library; staff members are celebrating its 100th anniversary! The building and grounds of this beautiful, friendly library were dedicated to the residents of Rumson on Thanksgiving Day 1920 by Mr. and Mrs. Henry Eugene Meeker, of Rumson, in memory of their son, William H. Meeker, who gave his life in Pau, France, in service to his country during World War I. When you enter the library, you will notice the full-size portrait of young William in his uniform. His devastated parents "wanted to give a library to the village of Oceanic to perpetuate his memory," so they called on the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Rumson, Arthur McKay, to ask his congregation and the public if they would be interested in being founding members of a library. McKay held a meeting at the Lafayette Street School and signed up 200 founder members of the Oceanic Free Library Association. In December 1919, the Oceanic Public Library Trust was formed. The first trustees were Henry Eugene Meeker, stockbroker Theodore Banks, textile manufacturer Bertram Borden, attorney Thomas McCarter and Rumson Mayor Frank McMahon.

Meeker had the original library building constructed on the southwest corner of River Road (then called Ocean Avenue) and Second Street, in the most populous section of Rumson. Meeker's friend, architect Thomas Hastings of the firm Carrere and Hastings, designed a brick building with two rooms including a reading room that seated eight. Joel Burchell, of Long Branch, was the builder. Esther Bruce was hired as the first librarian.

During the construction, McKay organized a Book Day and residents brought more than 2,000 books to Bingham Hall for the library. Two days before Thanksgiving, the books were shelved, and an Open House was held on Thanksgiving Day 1920. A large crowd gathered at the American flag and pole donated by Borden to see the long-awaited library.

A Boys and Girls Club was instituted in 1933 and met at the library. Hyatt Cunningham, a sports columnist for the Red Bank Register, supervised the children who made birdhouses, built model planes, and played ping pong and chess in the library basement. Over the years, it became too crowded (Rumson's increasing population in 1953 was 6,500), so they were faced with either expanding the building or moving into a larger building.

Expanding the space was expensive and, in 1956, deemed not viable. The



The original 1920 library building (Bank of America building today)

construction of Holy Cross School, Rumson Country Day School, Forrestdale School and other church expansions had left residents exhausted. But in 1959, a door-to-door canvassing campaign garnered many donations large and small for the purchase a new building.

The former Hintelmann's General Store on the corner of Avenue of Two Rivers and Ridge Road was purchased and the architectural firm Moon, Iwatsou and Macksoud, of Englewood, did the re-design. Pirie Maloney, of Rumson, was the general contractor. On Oct. 26, 1959, the new library opened with space for 28,000 volumes and 3,000 card holders - 1,000 of them being children.

A historic must-read is William Henry Meeker's "His Book" published in 1917. This touching, lyrical book is a collection of school notes, short stories and letters from France. It was reprinted in 2017 by library board member Ed Pomphrey and is available for sale at the library.

Library President Carolyn Miller said, "One of the library's fondest possessions is a collection of about 200 books Mr. Meeker assembled from living authors of the day, many signed by the authors with personal notes. Some of the prominent authors were P.G. Wodehouse who penned, 'I'm so glad to have my books in your library.' Others in the collection are A.A. Milne, author of 'Winnie the Pooh,' Charles Lindbergh, Helen Keller and many more. I wish to sincerely thank our current director, Nanette Reis, association members Thomas Mertens and Janine Hallisey, and student volunteers Thomas Makin and Brad Miller who are currently working hard to preserve this collection of antiquities."

The library remains a private memorial funded and supported by the residents of Rumson. The Oceanic Public Library Trust was formed in 1919 and today is headed by Carl Reiss, of Rumson. The Oceanic Free Library Association was incorporated in 1929 and is responsible for the operations of the library. The library is a vibrant hub for residents who use it as a resource and social site, including a rotating monthly gallery sale of original artwork. They host popular events like the Chili Cook Off, Cup Cake Wars and Irish Soda Bread Contest, have a dedicated Children's Room and a busy calendar of monthly events.



Hintelmann's store, where the library moved to in 1959