The History of the Kewanee Public Library  
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The Kewanee Public Library is located on the corner of Tremont and First Streets. During its history the library has inhabited three different locations and has had one name change. The Kewanee Public Library has gone through many changes during its history.

In 1872, the state library law was enacted, which allowed townships to vote for tax supports for public libraries. In 1874, two years after the enactment of the state library law, a township election was held. At this election a one mill property tax of Kewanee Township was voted upon. This property tax allowed the township to establish funds to found a library.

During the following year, 1875, the Kewanee Library Association was formed. Fourteen members signed the association’s constitution, nine of which were recorded. These members are: W.H. Russell, president; W.T. Cross, vice-president; James K. Blish, secretary; R.P. Parrish, treasurer; Adolph Maul and C.K. Ladd who eventually became the first Board of Directors; and H.T. Lay, A.F. Bigelow and B.A. Gurney. Between the signing of the constitution and the opening of the library, funds were collected. Through the finance committee and a course of lectures funds were raised. The money received during this time permitted the purchase of books.

After the association raised enough money and purchased books they were ready for the opening of the library. On February 1, 1875 the Kewanee Library Association had its grand opening. The library was located in the northwest room of the newly built town hall. At its dedication it was named “Library Hall.” The first librarian was John G. Blish and the library contained 262 books. The library was open to the township during evenings and Sunday afternoons.

In April of 1875 the first big change to the library association was made. It was at this time that it was renamed the Kewanee Public Library. The public library was launched under the Illinois Library Law and the same directors from the association became the directors of the new public library. The library was one of the first to be founded under the Illinois Library Law. It was among libraries located in Chicago, Rockford, Peoria, Evanston, Galesburg and Moline. All of the books and funds were transferred over to the Kewanee Public Library. The library remained in the town hall even though the name change was made.

It was not until 1880 that the library packed up the books and relocated. It moved onto the second floor of the Odd Fellows Building on the northwest corner of First and Tremont Streets. It was also during this year that another one mill tax was added to give the library the maximum tax rate for maintenance.
In 1901, a Kewanee citizen took it upon himself to seek help for the Kewanee Public Library. Alexander McLean wrote to Andrew Carnegie with his concern for the needs of the town. On March 14, 1901, McLean gained a response to his letter; Carnegie would grant $20,000 to produce a public library in Kewanee. There were two requirements set by Carnegie. The township needed to purchase a site and uphold an income no less then $2,500 a year. When the township could not come up with enough money, Carnegie was asked to double his gift, but he refused.

In 1905, James K. Blish drafted a bill that allowed library directors to borrow money to purchase sites for township libraries. The Illinois General Assembly passed it and in 1905, bonds for $15,000 were set. Because of the new law, a site on the corner of First and Tremont streets was purchased for $10,000.

After the selection of the site, the directors began to plan what the library would look like and what was needed inside. After studying other libraries they came to the conclusion that the money donated by Carnegie was not going to be enough to provide a sufficient library for Kewanee. With much help from A.M. Hewlett, Carnegie was persuaded to contribute an additional $5,000. Another $15,000 was voted upon in the township. The Library now had a total of $55,000 on hand for the building and site.

The directors began their search for an architect to design the library. Well-known library architects, Patton and Miller of Chicago, were chosen. As the building was being readied, the books were being reorganized so when the building was ready for use, the entire library would be as up to date as possible. Women in the community also helped by raising a sum of $400 to purchase new children’s books for the opening. In January of 1907 the corner stone of the building was laid.

At the dedication of the library, on April 21, this was how the building was described. The building faces the west and is set back from the sidewalk forty feet. It stands two stories high with a well-lit basement. The exterior of the building has Bedford stone trimmings and the walls are dark colored paving brick. At the end of a stone flight of stairs is the entrance that sits between four solid stone monoliths that weigh nearly six tons separately. Sitting on top of these four monoliths is immense stonework. The interior of the building is lit by the dome the covers the center of the building. The inside has oaken plate glass doors and a vestibule with mosaic and polished white green rain marble wainscoating, which extends six feet above the floor. To the left of the vestibule is a staircase leading to the basement and Further into the building is a staircase that leads to the second floor. This staircase has white marble steps and a banister made of oak and on the first landing there is an artistic semi-circle shaped window. At the top of the staircase is the only exposed wooden floor, the rest of the library is carpeted in green. The building contains many different rooms that provide an abundance of services. There is a delivery room, a children’s room, which is filled with books for all ages of children, a stacks room that extends from the basement to the second floor and has the ability to hold up to 32,000 books, a spacious reading room and a reference section. There is also an art room, which displays the libraries collection of pictures and a township room, which is located in the basement.
From the 262 books that were owned by the Kewanee Library Alliance, the public library grew into nearly 9,000 books at the time of its opening. Sixty years later, in 1967, the recorded number of books had grown to 60,000. The library also housed a collection of recordings, films, pictures, pamphlets, maps, magazines and newspapers.

Many gifts have been given from organizations and friends of the library. Some of these gifts played key roles in the progress of the library. In 1929, Emerit E. Baker donated $5,000 to purchase new reference and science books and in 1930 he donated another $5,000, which was used to purchase a second tier of book stacks. Baker also gave annual gifts for books for years until a trust fund was established in 1948. One of the most valuable gifts was the one given by Mr. and Mrs. Thomas P. Pierce. They donated a collection of reproductions of famous paintings, illustrating the history of painting. Additional funds were also given from Mr. and Mrs. P.D. Adler to the book funds to purchase fiction and biography books. In 1966, the Rotary Club gave a collection of twenty-four art reproductions and then added eight more later in the same year. More have been added since that time.

In 1911 the library began to produce collections of children's books to be distributed to Kewanee and Wethersfield schools. Between 1914-1929 the library maintained small branches to serve the public. These branches were located at the Boss Manufacturing company factory and the Walworth Girls Club. Volunteers operated both of these branches, but when help was not available the branches were closed. There are also branches at the Brandenburg Church, Kewanee Public Hospital and St. Francis Hospitals. During the Great Depression a group called the Works Progress Administration gave classes on bookbinding. This really helped circulation during those years. In 1946 the library branched out onto the corner of Tenth and Elm streets. It was formed to serve the schools and other parts of town. In 1953, this branch was closed because of the development of school libraries.

On Friday, April 21, 1950, the Kewanee Public Library celebrated its 75th anniversary. At this celebration many gifts were given in memory of the first directors. At this time the funds from the Baker trust fund were coming to an end, so a $20,000 bond was given to the library to uphold money from the trust fund.

In 1959, a Wethersfield Library Board was elected. They levied a library tax and signed a contract with the Kewanee Public Library for the terms of library service to the citizens of Wethersfield Township. In 1962 the library became part of the Illinois Valley Library System, a network used to share resources statewide. This network helps to broaden the services for the community. There were two separate boards until 1989 when they combined and made one district library.

Through the years changes were made to the building. In 1973 a street level entrance was added and an elevator was put on Second St. Both of these additions made it much easier to access the building. In 1978, all of the windows were replaced with new energy efficient ones. In 1988, a new heating and air conditioning systems were
purchased and installed. In 1882, Friends of the Library were established to help with fund raising and volunteer help.

Computerization has made a huge impact on the way the library serves the community. The card catalog that was considered modern when it was introduced in 1908 was removed in the 1990's by a computerized on-line catalog. Books and other materials are checked in and out electronically.

The latest addition to the library is the new renovation. While the library building is being renovated the libraries materials have all been moved to the old Swedman's Pharmacy. The open house for the library will take place on June 3, 2001.

The library has come a long way in the last 125 years. From Library Hall and the Kewanee Library Association to the Kewanee Public Library on Tremont street the library has been through a lot. The library also has a long-standing reputation for serving its community well. With the new renovation it is sure to carry on this tradition.