

# The History of the Flossmoor Public Library

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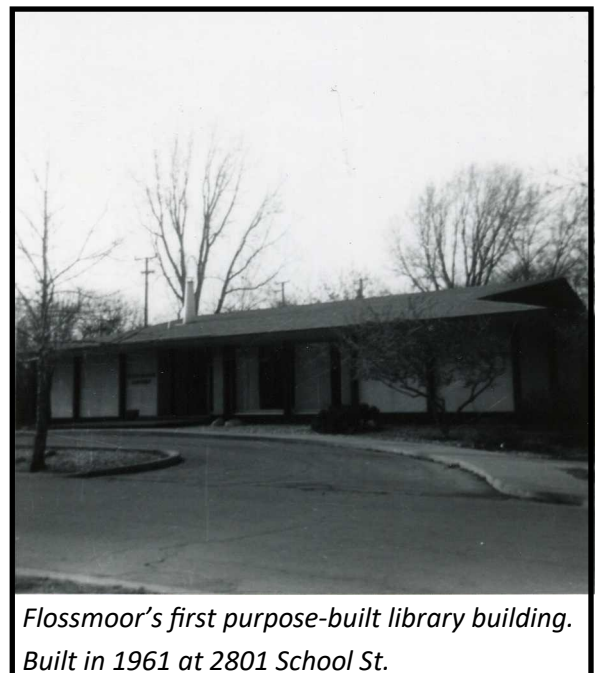
## PART 1: 1924—1963

The first non-native settlers in the area that would eventually become Flossmoor began arriving in the 1830s. The area would remain semi-rural for several decades before finally incorporating in 1924. The young village had 265 residents at the time and worked towards establishing a village government, police and fire departments, and modern schools. Early library service to these citizens was provided by the Homewood Public Library (established in 1924) or, for some, the Chicago Public Library. Eventually, in the 1940s, a group of citizens gathered with the concern of providing local library services to the village. In June of 1947, the Village Bookshelf was organized. This small volunteer-run library was would change locations frequently. At first it was located in the fieldhouse in Flossmoor Park. Later it was in the Morgan Building at 2610 Flossmoor Road. In May of 1948 the Bookshelf moved back to the fieldhouse. That fall, the Bookshelf was moved for a final time, to borrowed space in the Leavitt Avenue School (which is no longer standing).

The Bookshelf closed in September 1949 due to space constraints at the growing school, but interest in local library services had been established by the experiment. Despite its vagabond existence, the Bookshelf was considered a great success. The collection grew from 450 volumes to over 3000, and the circulation total for the final year was 3164, or two books for every citizen of Flossmoor at the time. After the Bookshelf closed in 1949, all books were put in storage for future use.

On June 30, 1953, the establishment of a tax-supported Flossmoor Library was approved by a vote of 203 to 126. After this vote, the newly established library board committed to waiting a full year before starting library services, so that the new tax could fill the library's coffers before it opened. The board set out to find a space to house the library. At first, they were interested in purchasing the historic Illinois Central train station, but that proposal fell through. On December 5th, 1954, the library had a grand opening in a rented location in the Civic Center (1042 Sterling—home in 2024 to The Conservatory Vintage & Vinyl store). For the first time, the library was staffed with professional employees: Marie Gaskill was the head librarian and she was assisted by two employees. The library was open 29 hours per week, and it was reported that the Flossmoor Library had the highest circulation of any library in South Cook County from 1954—1958.

With the collection continuing to grow and the library being well-utilized, it was determined that the library was outgrowing its rented quarters. In November of 1959, a referendum passed authorizing \$145,000 in twenty-year bonds for the construction of a modern library building. The library board commissioned McPherson-Swing & Associates as architects for the new building, which was built on land purchased with funds donated by the Friends of the Flossmoor Library and seven prominent Flossmoor families. In February 1961, the library moved into a new headquarters at 2801 School Street. The library had an area of 5567 square feet and a volume capacity of 25,000 items. In 1963, the library building received a national award of merit for design in the inaugural class of the American Library Association/American Institute of Architects Library Building Awards. As of 2024, this building is home to Restoration of Faith Church.



*Flossmoor's first purpose-built library building.  
Built in 1961 at 2801 School St.*

## PART 2: 1964—2001

In 1968, the first library director, Mrs. Marie Gaskill, retired after 15 years of service and was replaced by Mrs. Adelle McMillan. Under Mrs. McMillan's leadership, the library continued to grow in terms of holdings, circulation, budget, and hours open per week. The new building also afforded the library the opportunity to provide more programming, such as story hours, speakers, and music recitals, and house exhibitions of painting, sculpture, and photography. By April of 1974, the library was circulating 97,800 books per year, or nearly 12 books per citizen of Flossmoor. The hours per week had increased to 62. A concern arose, however, in that by 1979 the building designed to house 25,000 items was now housing 34,000. Another change had to come.

At the same time the library was running out of space, the village government vacated their existing Village Hall, 1000 Sterling Avenue on the north edge of downtown, for a newer facility located on Flossmoor Road. The library entered a period of split service, keeping part of the collection in the School Street Library while moving another part to the old Village Hall. Specifically, the School Street location housed the children's collection, all reference materials, some non-fiction, and the technical services; the old Village Hall (renamed Branch Library), held all new items, all fiction, business materials, fine art, craft books, and travel guides.

The split-service period lasted for three years before it was decided the entirety of library operations would move to the former village hall. After some remodeling, the new Flossmoor Public Library opened at 1000 Sterling Ave on December 19, 1983. In the 1980s, the library focused on incorporating the "digital revolution" into their everyday services, purchasing Apple IIe computers for the public to use,

and adding compact discs and audiobooks to the collection. Electronic databases were added for patrons to search for newspaper and journal articles from hundreds of publications around the globe.

By the end of the 20th century, the library was again feeling cramped in their space in the old village hall. In June 1994, it was reported that the library had over 55,000 items in its collection and was circulating 149,000 items per year. In addition, the fifty-year old building was starting to show its age physically, and there were concerns about compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, a landmark federal law that required buildings be accessible to users of all abilities (As one specific example, the library had to stop using the highest shelf of the tall bookcases, a situation that resulted in almost 20% of the adult collection being put in storage). Library administration attempted to mitigate access issues as much as possible, but the combination of compliance issues, decaying facility, and lack of space necessitated another major change for the library organization.



*The former village hall, which housed the public library from 1979—2004. It was demolished to build the existing library.*

## PART 3: 2002—2024

Although the library staff and administration was convinced of the inadequacy of their current building, they still had to make their case to the voters and taxpayers of Flossmoor. On Election Day, March 19th 2002, the library presented two referendums to the voters for approval. The first was for the library to sell \$7.9 million in bonds to fund the construction of a new library. The second was to increase the tax rate for the library by 20% to help fund library activities in the proposed new building. Both referendums passed with about 52% of the voters voting yes.

With the referendums passed, the library administration moved on to the planning and construction phase of the project. The library board contracted with Burnidge Cassell and Associates to provide architectural services for the new building. The goal of the project was to design a building that would harmonize with the other buildings in downtown Flossmoor, such as the Civic Center and Flossmoor Station. Although occupying the same lot as the previous library, the new building would provide three times the amount of square footage. Another key part of the plan was the acquisition and demolition of two adjacent houses to provide needed parking, which the previous building sorely lacked.

After the architects finalized the plans, the old building closed and a temporary facility made of pre-fabricated modular components opened on the back side of the library's land. Then the old building was demolished and the new building erected in its place. The new building opened in December 2004 at a final cost of \$8 million. The new building offered 34,000 square feet and was fully networked for providing up-to-date technology for the 21st century. The building also drastically increased capacity for the library's collection, and contained new amenities such as dedicated programming and play space in the children's area, a large meeting room in the basement, a conference room, three private study rooms, over twenty internet stations, and upgraded facilities for the staff.

In 2024, the "new building" is going to be celebrating its 20th anniversary of service for the community of Flossmoor. It has proven to be a success and has also continued to adapt to changing needs. Some small-scale remodels have freshened up the teen services and adult services areas, increased the number of study rooms from three to five, created a large "book sale" room that supports the library's Friends group, consolidated staff facilities, and deployed advancing technology.

Library services also continued to grow and adapt as the years go by. In the 21st century, the library began providing access to over 50,000 e-books, 30,000 streaming movies or videos, and millions of articles and reference resources available through databases. In addition, the physical collection holds over 55,000 books, 4000 CDs, and 3000 DVDs, as well as video and board games and a "Library of Things" consisting of objects available to borrow.



*The library pictured after a snowy day in March of 2017.*

## PART 4: CONCLUSION

As of the writing of this history In 2024, Flossmoor is celebrating the Centennial anniversary of the incorporation of the village. Coincidentally, we can also recognize two significant anniversaries for the village's library: seventy years as a tax-supported public institution and twenty years in our "new" building.

Over the decades of public library service in Flossmoor, the organization has continued to grow and adapt to changing times. While the library still offers "traditional" library services—access to books, magazines, and newspapers, for example—a myriad of new services, resources, and programming has ensured that the library has not become a stagnant, backwards-looking organization.

Almost as important as the resources, services, and programming the library offers is the sense of the library as a welcoming center for the community. To that end, the library's advantageous physical location has augmented its status within the community. The building provides a center for gatherings in the heart of Flossmoor, and has held several village-wide community events, such as new resident welcoming parties, seasonal festivals, and indoor and outdoor musical performances. In addition, the library's staff is committed to friendly, engaging, and empathetic customer service to any member of the public who walks through the doors, in the hopes that those efforts ultimately contribute in part to an increased quality of life for the community we serve.



*"The Secret Garden," a piece by Colorado-based sculptor Mark Lundeen, was placed in front of the library building when it opened in 2004. It has now become a beloved symbol of the library amongst Flossmoor residents.*

# **Works Used**

Three major volumes of general Flossmoor history have been published over the years. Each of them discuss, to varying degrees, the history of the Flossmoor Public Library. They are:

Adair, Anna B., and Sandberg, Adele. *Indian Trails to Tollways: The Story of the Homewood-Flossmoor Area*. Fremouw Press, 1968

Kabbes, Elise D., and GiaQuinta, Mary. *Images of America: Flossmoor, Illinois*. Arcadia Publishing, 1999.

Wagner, Susan F. *A History of the Village of Flossmoor 1851—1974*. Flossmoor Historical Committee, 1974.

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In addition to the above, I relied heavily on two unpublished documents that are in the historical archives at the library. These two works were both apparently produced by anonymous library staff. In 1974, a 15-page brochure titled “History of Flossmoor Public Library” was produced. It provides terrific detail about the 1940s Flossmoor Bookshelf and subsequent library services in the community up to the mid-1970s. There is a copy of this brochure in the library’s historical archives. No author is provided.

In 1994, a two-page “update” on the library’s history was written. It summarizes the earlier brochure and provides details on the era from 1974—1994. At the end of this document is the notation “(SKP)” which may be the initials for the author. However, I have not been able to determine who “SKP” was.

In addition to the above, I conducted research at the Chicago Tribune archives website, the Flossmoor Public Library archives, and used my own experience as an employee for 17 years (and counting) to write the portions of this document that cover the era after 1994.

I am deeply grateful for the people—anonymous or not—who compiled historical information on the library before I did. Compiling local history can be a thankless task but I believe it is important to the understanding of our community.

Should the reader note any errors, please send an e-mail to [flossref@flossmoorlibrary.org](mailto:flossref@flossmoorlibrary.org) and they may be corrected in a future edition of this document.