

The Lenawee County Historical Museum

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The Lenawee County Historical Museum at 110 East Church Street in Adrian, Michigan is, for the most part, a typical Richardsonian Romanesque building. It was built in 1906-08 as the community public library with funds provided in part by Andrew Carnegie and converted to Historical Museum in 1978.

Most sources of information describe the characteristics of Richardsonian Romanesque architecture, which began around 1870, similarly. In the book *House Styles in America* by James C. Massey and Shirley Maxwell suggest that Richardsonian Romanesque architecture was used primarily for churches and public buildings, while Lester Walker also included schools, railroad stations, jails, libraries and other public buildings. Although the date ranges are similar in these sources the end of the period ranges from 1890 - 1910.

Characteristics of Romanesque architecture are comparable in all three sources. According to Mallory Baches, in her article entitled *A Matter of Style: Richardsonian Romanesque*, Henry Hobson Richardson enhanced Romanesque architecture by combining elements of both the French and Spanish designs. Masonry construction, semicircular arches over doors and windows, asymmetrical organization, and decorative belts are the basic characteristics. Richardson, though, typically included one or more towers in his designs and created dramatic arches based more on Syrian rather than Romanesque influence. Massey and Maxwell's book describes Richardson's interpretation of Romanesque architecture as "so fresh and powerful that in the United States the style became inseparably linked to his name" (p 119). Although Richardson died

prematurely at age 47, in 1886, his influence architecture is evident in American architecture, in large part due to an 1888 monograph about his life and work by Mariana van Rensselaer.

The Lenawee County Historical Museum has many characteristics of Richardsonian Romanesque architecture. From the asymmetrical structure and the conical roof towers to the typical red sandstone belts, the structure provides an excellent example of the Richardsonian style. The first floor, partially below ground, includes a horizontal row of windows and is separated from the second floor by a foundation of rough red sandstone blocks which are also used for lintels, transoms, and sills. Extending upward over the entrance is a massive red sandstone arch that encompasses part of the first floor and all of the second.



Entrance

The second floor also includes a horizontal row of windows that are accented by a small square window above each one and separated by a narrow belt of the red sandstone brick.

Once again, a belt of red sandstone separates the second and third floors.

At first glance, the third floor appears to repeat the second. However, closer examination reveals subtle differences between the two. The third floor does not have the small windows above the larger ones, several of the third floor

windows are arched, and a portion of the third floor reveals both a Spanish and French influence.

The building includes three towers on one end and a rectangular shaped structure on the other. The rectangular portion has been accented with arched windows which are presented with small Palladian windows above them and a Spanish style gable. Separated from the rectangular portion by the massive entrance is a hexagon shaped tower that provides a touch of French influence through red sandstone lattice-style brickwork above arched windows. This tower

is also distinct from the other towers because of the flat roof and protruding cornices. Next to this tower is the largest of the three towers covered by a conical roof which is more typical of the period. The third tower lies behind the large one and is once again hexagonal with a six-sided, pointed roof. Two characteristics of this structure that are atypical of Richardsonian architecture are the smooth exterior surface of glazed brick and the windows, which are not deeply set.



Tower

A June 30, 1908 a front-page article in the *Adrian Daily Times* described the library for its readers, allowing us today to understand its original layout, starting with its two entrances, one on Church Street and one on Dennis Street. The article went on to describe the interior as having a children's room and a



Original Reading Room

large reading room to the left and right respectively of the Church Street entrance. Just inside the Dennis Street entrance was a circular shaped reading room with a smaller,

circular room off each side. The smaller rooms were intended to be used as writing and reference rooms. The librarian's office was located at the rear of the half circular book stacks.

The second floor included a large auditorium, two committee rooms, an art museum, and a club room. There were also several rooms in the basement used for unpacking and storage. A lift provided the means to get books from the unpacking room in the basement to the stacks above.

Planning and construction of the building took several years. Charles Lindquist, in his book entitled *Adrian the City That Worked*, mentioned that although actual



construction took place from 1906 – 1908, the city began working on it in 1904,

after Andrew Carnegie's gift of twenty-seven thousand dollars (p 131). A June 11, 1985 article about Carnegie in the *Brooklyn Exponent* said:

"...this Scottish immigrant had amassed a \$333 million fortune in American steel late in the 19th century and was in the process of giving most of it away. In all, Carnegie donated more than \$40 million for the construction of exactly 1,679 public library buildings in 1,412 communities across the country. Another 830 were erected overseas. George S. Bobinski, author of *Carnegie Libraries*, says 'Even in this day, the public is still greatly aware of Carnegie's library philanthropy.' From the 52 branch libraries in New York City to the dozens of Carnegies located in isolated towns of the Great Plains, the benefactor's libraries spread rapidly across America between 1886 and 1919. In general, Carnegie and his secretary James Bertram, who made most of the building decisions after 1908, left the exterior styles and selection of architects up to each community. But they wanted the buildings to be 'functional, giving straight-forward service.'"

Christian Frederick Matthes, the contractor selected to build the city's library, was recognized as a leading light in the city of Adrian. According to *Memories of Lenawee County*, his skill as a draftsman vaulted him to the top of his profession in the area. Matthes studied his trade in Detroit before returning to Adrian to work with his father, and was involved in designing and building many area buildings including the State Reform School for Girls, which is now known as the Adrian Training School (467). More than fifty plans for the new library were received from architects all over the country. After careful deliberation, a design submitted by Bloomington, Illinois architect Paul O. Moratz was selected, and the project was underway (*Adrian Times*, February 6, 1909, p. 7).

Carnegie agreed to donate \$27,500 and the City of Adrian spent an additional \$5,000 to complete the library project. In the agreement with Carnegie, the city was required to pledge ten percent of the total cost annually for

upkeep. The corner stone of the twelve thousand square foot building was placed in position November 5, 1907 and the building was completed and made ready for occupancy by February 5, 1909 (Bonner). The building was placed on the National Registry of Historic Places in 1976 and sold for ten dollars in 1978 to the Lenawee County Historical Society (Lindquist).

Few changes have been made to the building's exterior since its construction. Only the crenellation on the top of the north tower was removed and the slate roof was replaced with shingles. Interior renovations were completed in 1980 to meet fire and safety codes and add an elevator for public use. The building now houses historical collections from all parts of Lenawee County.

Adrian at the time the library was built was a prosperous and growing community. In his book on Adrian, Charles Lindquist describes the city in the 1900s as growing from a population of 9,654 in 1900 to 10,763 in 1910, a growth of eleven and one-half percent. Lindquist suggests the growth was primarily due to the wire fence industry: "This was the decade when a number of companies continued to grow or were formed and began to grow" (p 117). The 1900s saw Adrian's downtown develop with attractive new commercial buildings that were brightly lit. Variety and department stores began to bolster the city center. Lindquist noted that local government also expanded in the 1900s. In 1901, city voters approved a \$50,000 bond issue to build a sewer and to pave streets stretching into the east side industrial district. The Board of Education also needed to modernize during the period. The population had increased by one-

third since the Central School was built in 1869. New classes and interest in organized sports also demanded improved high school facilities. The growth in the early 1900s caused an increase in the construction of houses. In 1903 the *Adrian Times and Expositor* described fifty-five new houses that were being built. Two years later the *Telegram* listed thirty new homes. Much of the construction took place on College, Clinton, Dennis, and Ferguson streets. The 1900s also brought more leisure time to Adrian residents.

The Lenawee County Historical Museum provides an excellent focal point to study historical architecture in Adrian. The building is located near a number of historical homes as well as the downtown area and easily stands out as a premier example of the Richardsonian Romanesque style.

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