

A Brief History of the James Library

Written in 1994 by Sally Turner for the rededication of the James Library

The Norwell Common, surrounded by white-painted Colonial, Federal, or Greek Revival period houses, presents a quintessential New England village scene. However, the James Library, sited on the West side of the Common, has been an architectural oddity among its neighbors for 120 years, and its appearance has led many to ask "What is it, and where did it come from?"

Built in 1873 by the First Parish Church as a library and parish building, the James is an excellent example of Italianate architecture popularized in the 1840's and '50's by Andrew Jackson Downing, a landscape designer and architectural theorist. Downing deplored the ubiquitous Greek temple form being used for every kind of building in the 1820's and '30's, as having no relevance to the natural American landscape. He favored a picturesque style derived from Italian landscape paintings. The Italian style, also known as Tuscan, Lombard, Round, or Bracketted style, became popular in this country during the years preceding the Civil War, but by 1873, when the James Library was built, it was on the wane in most areas, making this a relatively late example.

In spite of changing styles and attitudes over the years, the James Library is still physically intact and in full operation. There has been a renewed interest in the James, and curiosity about how it came to be built here. It seems that, in 1871, Josiah L. James, a Chicago businessman, felt an urge to do something to benefit South Scituate, his native town and parish. He had left the town thirty years earlier as a young man. His ancestors had been among the early settlers of the town, and he wished to memorialize them somehow. When he heard of a project to replenish the Sunday School Library of the Unitarian Church in South Scituate, he sent the minister, the Reverend William Fish, a donation of one thousand dollars. Rev. Fish later wrote,

"The gift came as a great and grateful surprise... [it] set many, if not all of us, to talking of a new and more general library and building suitable for its use, and also for social, educational and religious purposes... whilst we were earnestly talking this matter over, quite to our surprise again, Mr. James sent me another check for one-thousand dollars for the very purpose which we had in view..."

Thus began a partnership, which led eventually to the construction, in 1873, of the James Library and Parish Building.

To understand this partnership, we have to back up a bit. The Reverend Fish was born and raised in Newport, Rhode Island. After studying for the ministry in Providence, he traveled with his bride to teach school in Tremont, Illinois. Mr. Josiah L. James was one of Tremont's founders; Mr. and Mrs. Fish stayed at his large home for a time, and they became lifelong friends. Eighteen months later, in 1838, Mr. Fish and his wife returned East, and he was ordained as minister of the Restorationist denomination in Millville, Massachusetts, where he preached for nine years. Next he became interested in the

Transcendentalist movement, and joined the community of Hopedale, staying for another nine years. He later became minister to the Unitarian Church in Cortland, New York. There he

"organized a literary association under whose auspices the most celebrated lecturers and men of letters of the day lectured or preached in his pulpit, the list including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, Thomas Starr King, Horace Mann, Horace Greeley, George William Curtis, Henry Ward Beecher, Theodore Parker, and Samuel J. May...".

After another nine years, (did he have a nine year itch?) Reverend Fish and his wife moved East again, settling in South Scituate in 1865, as minister of this Church. The Civil War had just ended, and the town was welcoming back 120 of its citizens who had served in the Army, and honoring another 24 who had been killed.

The new minister had strong liberal convictions, and visions of improving society. Soon the idea of a library was being talked of, and a Mr. James in Chicago wanted to help. With two thousand dollars already in hand, Mr. Fish began in earnest to circulate a subscription paper. Almost six thousand dollars was raised, and a half-acre site adjacent to the Church, overlooking the Common, was donated by Israel Nash. Mr. James sent more money for the building, books, and interior furnishings. His donations to the project totaled more than \$5,900.00 of the total building fund of \$13,500.00. Construction was begun in 1873, and the Library was dedicated on May 1st, 1874, with speeches and the singing of hymns composed for the occasion.

Reverend Fish was the first librarian, and there were over six hundred volumes on the shelves when it opened, many undoubtedly selected by Mr. Fish himself. The catalogue of 1874 included works of Carlyle, Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Theodore Parker, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Thoreau, and Whittier, as well as interesting titles such as Sex and Education by Julia Ward Howe, Foregleams of Immortality, Ten Nights in a Bar-Room, and Lectures to Young Men.

Reverend Fish was clearly the most influential person in the planning, fund-raising, and early operation of the James Library. But there is a surprise factor about Mr. Fish and the Library. He had lived for some years in Cortland, New York, and as anyone who has traveled through Cortland and other towns in central New York State knows, they are FULL of Italianate-style buildings which look just like the James. So, in answer to the question "Where did the James Library come from?" it could be said that Reverend Fish brought it back from New York! Historically, styles of buildings moved from East to West; from Europe to the United States, and gradually West as far as civilization reached at a given time. But here it seems that a stylish vision came full circle, brought back to this aspiring New England village by the worldly Reverend Fish and his generous friend, Mr. Josiah L. James.