HISTORY, CULTURE, MEMORY, AND FUTURE

a poem by Regie O’Hare Gibson

Celebrating 150 Years of Library Service!
History, Culture, Memory, and Future

By Regie O’Hare Gibson

For Cary Memorial Library’s 150th Anniversary
Dedicated to Maria Hastings Cary and all who, over the decades, have and continue the work of maintaining this legacy.

Educate and inform the whole mass of the people… they are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty.

From Thomas Jefferson to Uriah Forrest, with Enclosure, 31 December 1787

If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects to what never was and never will be.

Extract from Thomas Jefferson to Charles Yancey Monticello 6 January 1816

Having a regard for my native place and wishing to promote its welfare by diffusing knowledge among its inhabitants, I desire to make through you the following proposition…

A free public library open to all the inhabitants of the town…

Maria Hastings Cary’s letter to the Selectmen of Lexington 10 December, 1867

I love this place!

6, 11, 18, 25, 43 and 80 year old Lexington inhabitants - October and November- 2018
Welcome, Stranger. Friend. Booktraveler:
You whose feet and fate have led you here.
Know there are generations stitched in these stones—
Volumes of past voices heavy with history
Hovering in this very air you now breathe.

It began with words. With language.
With human story, knowledge, and wisdom
Passed down from mouth to waiting ear
Until they flowed
Like river ancient as the world and older than the flow
Of human blood in human veins.*

It began like so many things begin—
With a woman with a will that opens a door… a book …a mind.
With a woman with a need to plant a seed
That would grow and blossom in a tomorrow
She knew she’d never see. This is her legacy:

Cary Memorial Library

This place is no mere repository of aged page
And leather bound book.
This is home to memory and culture, history and future
(And asks that you travel through it, and look…)

Look at the young mouths with missing front teeth—
Mouths slacked agape at the flick of a fin’s movement.

A race to the aquarium where nose and eyelash
Press against thick glass
And mouths sound out the scientific names of fish.

Hear the scamper of legs excited for music or story-time.
The exuberant hellos from and for librarians: those well-read
Bookjugglers tossing multitudes of titles in their heads—
Virgilian guides joylistening to kids talking of what they’ve read—or, nostalgically smiling as they watch 6 year olds spread
Quietly on couches and cushions
Reading books they themselves loved as children.

See children leading each other, hand by hand
Through colorful columns of bookspines.

Pink t-shirts and cargo pants
Weaving and giggling through aisles.

Ponytails and pigtails, cowlicks, crewcuts
And cornrows leaning into a mother
As she reads aloud.

Her finger pointing to each syllable
As small lips flex, stretch and round—
Practicing the spellsound of consonant and vowel.
Look— another young face soon to butterfly into knowledge!
There... in the eyes...
see the mindwings emerging— beginning to unfold?!
That is the alchemy that turns lead into gold—
the magic that makes children see
endless possibilities
they impatiently wait for the rest of us to realize!

Yes, beneath this red-tiled roof—
beneath this historic sky
you will find a community of widened eyes.

Here is where teenagers gather into a live hive
—abuzz with pizza and pimples. Braces and brash.

Listen to their fast-paced conversations— their whiplash
of sentences exploding into paragraphs
of adolescent laughter.

Witness how they self-create
—help one another try and find their way
in a world in which they often feel they have no place.

But, yet, they claim this place!

This space... they say, is where we sanctuary.
Where we can find what we need— even if we need nothing
but to hang out and play games, talk, read, and center.

This is our place— Adult, please do not enter
this part of our lives.
It's here we come to hide
from the stress and the strife
when the academic race seems so long—
or, when we are told we've somehow been running it all wrong.
This space is our escape from the discord of a world
demanding we dance to its song—

We come here when we are exhausted and feel lost and alone
and home has become a din of chaos and cacophony.

This is our place— where we can be with friends.
Each of them an origamic complexity.
Each of us an intricacy of legos seeking connections—
curious as to what shapes
we can make
of ourselves.

This is our place!

The place where we sometimes—must be.
The place we want our future kids to come—
so they can just... be...
Yes, this place of books is more than books.

It is memory and culture, history and future
constantly igniting curiosity—
fostering knowledge—
creating community.

Move through, see its spirit embodied in the elder
whose mind is vivid with the 1940’s.
Vivid with his father bringing him here
to read him stories before heading to work
because he knew he would not be back home in time
to tuck him in.

His father, doing all the characters voices
while he, a 5-year old child, giggled
at how his father’s accent colored every word—Irish.

It is embodied in a grandmother
recalling the late 1950’s.
When she, a Catholic teenage girl,
fell in love with a Jewish boy…
a love that, at the time, could not be.

It is her eyes, glistening as she tells
how they sat together
held hands beneath wooden tables
and explored first kisses

between book-lined shelves sheltered
from the orthodox eyes of synagogue and church.

It is door to door delivery to the housebound
— to those who cannot walk or drive.
Bringing braille or the recorded word to the blind
— or those whose eyes have clouded
but who can now crawl inside the human voice
and return to an ancient time when our ancestors
told tales that strengthened and bound us into tribe.

This place is a blessing! They say.
Our doorway to the world! They say.
Without it we’d be in an awful state—
unable to participate in intellectual life.

This library is a happiness.

Move through—open yourself and hear the new
— the recent immigrant or refugee
bringing their various linguistic richnesses:
Sanskrit and Hebrew, Mandarin and Telagu,
Tamil and Russian, Arabic and Greek,
German, Bengali, Korean, Marathi,
Hindi, Italian, French and Portuguese,
Turkish, Swedish, Taiwanese,
Finnish, Spanish and Vietnamese...
Each adding their voices and stories and songs to this rare air we breathe.

Continue through—see that couple that first came here with their children in 1972—
who, since becoming empty-nesters and moving away, come back to donate books because of that librarian who, long ago, welcomed and treated them with such kindness— the first of many.

Listen to the Deskgossipers— patrons at checkout joining in librarians’ conversations and becoming fast friends.

Listen to the mothers that walk here on mornings to talk here after their kids have gone off to school— mothers desperately in need of adult conversation about anything (except parenting, kids, or school).

Chance into discussions at the book store on politics and science, Emerson and self-reliance, Shakespeare, history, cooking, interesting biographies that will change and challenge the way you see things as knowledge bursts against the mind’s nighttime like fireworks on the 4th of July.

Notice the middle aged woman studying for her college degree. Her mechanical pencil, a yellow blur as she highlights passages and scribbles marginalia.

See the man in mid-career brushing up his CV and searching newspaper and internet for job opportunities.

The retired teacher with stacks of books he uses to tutor those who want their G.E.D. so they can aspire— aim higher.

And, see her, who grew up having only had access to a mobile library that came by her school every 6-8weeks.

And, now, sits in an aisle in the poetry section surrounded by verse— her thin legs crossed, her brain soaring through vistas of imagination even as she angles how to take home more poems than she can possibly carry.

*This place holds a special place in my heart.*
She says… *It’s like a gift from heaven.*

Whether of no religion or devoted to church, mosque or temple here, at Cary Memorial Library, we are all People of the Book—all, potential pilgrims taking part in a journey
to bring a community, a nation, a democratic republic
to its higher transcendent civic self where all can stand in the light
of our most sacred and self-evident truths.

But, this place did not happen on its own.
Did not grow on its own.
Did not become what it has become on its own.

It is what it is because of those who are who they are…

Because of decades of citizens serving in silence.
Unknown, unnamed, unsung volunteers
who give, mind, heart, hands, and countless hours—
meeting in small rooms to launch big ideas.

Cart pushers stocking shelves,
fund-raisers and book-sales,
multi-generational donors and endowments,
Friends, Foundation Members and Trustees
closely watching how every dime gets spent.

And, because of custodial caretakers toiling nightly—
putting in a light-bulb, turning a wrench,
fixing what needs fixing,
handling brooms, mops and pails,
taking great care to muscle things clean for the morning.

All of this is the slow work—
the you’ll never know work.
The unglorified, mean work
the often unnoticed and unseen work
of those that daily endeavor to uphold the scaffolding
that holds this place we all love, together.

Cary Memorial Library

Yes, its location and appearance may change.
Shelves will be moved.
Books renumbered, reordered, and rearranged
as information technologies inevitably push forward into
new terrain.

But, its mission, as ever, will be the same:

To remain a vibrant expression of Lexington life—
Strengthened by Memory. Preserving of Culture.
Rooted in History. Stretching toward the Future.
Growing with and adjusting to the ever-evolving needs
of Lexingtonians that we, today, will never see
or know.
But, through this legacy…
will know us through what we will will them:

   Cary Memorial Library

This place where knowledge, learning and intellectual democracy have a home.

May one day its future air hang heavy with volumes of our voices.
May one day this generation be stitched in these stones.

Regie O'Hare Gibson

* Line taken from the poem The Negro Speaks of Rivers by Langston Hughes