

# The Diverse History of Carnegie Hall

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HIS-295: Landscapes of Grinnell

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Carnegie Hall, formerly Carnegie Library, stands as a testament to the progress and evolution of Grinnell College and its constituents. Originally constructed in 1905, Carnegie Hall has lived through generations of students and faculty at Grinnell College while enduring a multitude of alterations and renovations. Carnegie has served Grinnell College and its needs throughout its 120 year history in a number of ways including as a library, post office, academic building, and more. This paper will delve into the history of Carnegie Hall, its architectural design, and lived experiences inside Carnegie.

"Goodnow Hall, which has been used as the library building for the past 19 years has served its purpose admirably in the past, but has now been outgrown. Through the beneficence of Mr. Andrew Carnegie, who has contributed \$50,000 for the purpose, a substantial, modern library building will be erected, during the summer of 1904."<sup>1</sup> This was part of the memo sent out to Grinnell College students and staff notifying them of the upcoming construction and induction of a new on campus library. This memo came after much discourse within the administration about the need for a new library to house the college's ever growing supply of books. Within 15 years of the college's relocation from Davenport to Grinnell the college's library, Goodnow Hall, was becoming overrun with incoming volumes, which, at the time the memo was sent out, had grown to over 30,000 volumes. Seeing this issue the president of Grinnell College at the time, Dan Bradley, began his search for a solution.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Grinnell College. 2014. "History of the Grinnell College Libraries." Grinnell College. 2014. <https://www.grinnell.edu/academics/libraries/about-us/history-grinnell-college-libraries>.

<sup>2</sup> Walker, Waldo. 2000. "Carnegie Hall | Digital Grinnell." Digital.grinnell.edu. January 2000. <https://digital.grinnell.edu/islandora/object/grinnell:3216>.

Concurrent to the problems being faced in Grinnell, Andrew Carnegie had begun funding the construction of a number of different libraries across the country. Carnegie, famously known for his work in the steel industry, had become one of the world's most renowned philanthropists in his later years, donating over 90% of his wealth to universities and non-profit organizations.<sup>3</sup> Knowing of Carnegie's great generosity, Dr. Albert Shaw, a successful journalist and Grinnell alum, reached out to Carnegie in hopes of obtaining funding for Grinnell's new library. After some deliberation between Carnegie and Shaw the deal was set. In February of 1903 Carnegie informed Shaw and Grinnell that he would be donating \$50,000 to the college to begin construction of their new library, but only under the conditions that for each of the next ten years the college will raise an additional \$5000 to support operational costs of the library and that the library be open to Grinnell's public.<sup>4</sup>

Now, with the funds to begin construction, Grinnell began looking for a potential suitor to contract and build their new library. H. D. Rawson, another Grinnell alum, was hired to draft the initial plans for the architecture of the library, and in September 1903, W. J. Zitterell and Co. out of Webster City, IA, were contracted to construct the new building based on the plans drawn up by Rawson. Of the eight contractors bidding, Zitterell and Co. came in the lowest at \$41,274 which marked the beginning of construction. Challenges to obtain a specified quality of brick delayed the construction

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<sup>3</sup> Carnegie Corporation of New York. 2019. "Andrew Carnegie's Story." Carnegie.org. Carnegie Corporation of New York. 2019. <https://www.carnegie.org/interactives/foundersstory/#>.

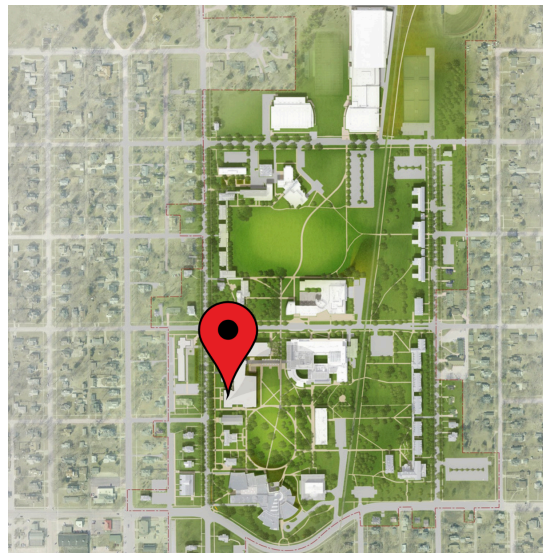
<sup>4</sup> Walker, 4.

by five months, causing the projected occupancy date to change from late 1904 to early 1905.<sup>5</sup>



Northside view of Carnegie Hall, 1905. Publisher: Poweshiek History Preservation Project

Construction for the library ceased in the early months of 1905 and Carnegie Hall's journey began. Centrally located in the south half of Grinnell's Campus, Carnegie Hall was visited by all people involved with the campus due to its stark architectural design. The library garnered widespread acclaim in the Midwest for its cutting-edge design, but its function as a full-time library wasn't initially fulfilled.

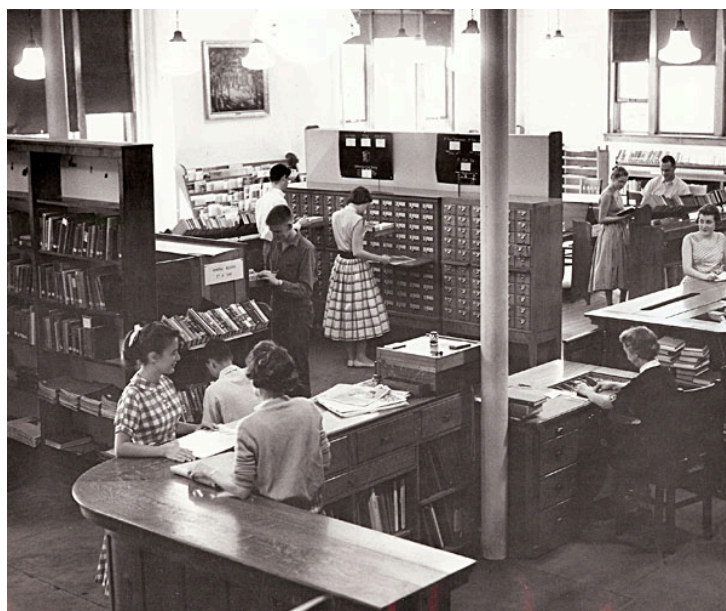


Map of Grinnell College Campus. Tagged: Carnegie Hall

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<sup>5</sup> Walker, 5.

For the first fourteen years post-resurrection Carnegie was utilized in various capacities. With only one third of the volume capacity being employed for use, Grinnell repurposed many of the vacant rooms into recitation and office spaces. It wasn't until 1919 Carnegie began its role as solely a functioning library.<sup>6</sup> More than any other facility at the college, Carnegie most resembled the traditional definition of a library as it boasted an ample study space for students along with room to fit the college's growing collection of books.<sup>7</sup>



Main study space in Carnegie Hall, 1950. Publisher: Grinnell College Archives

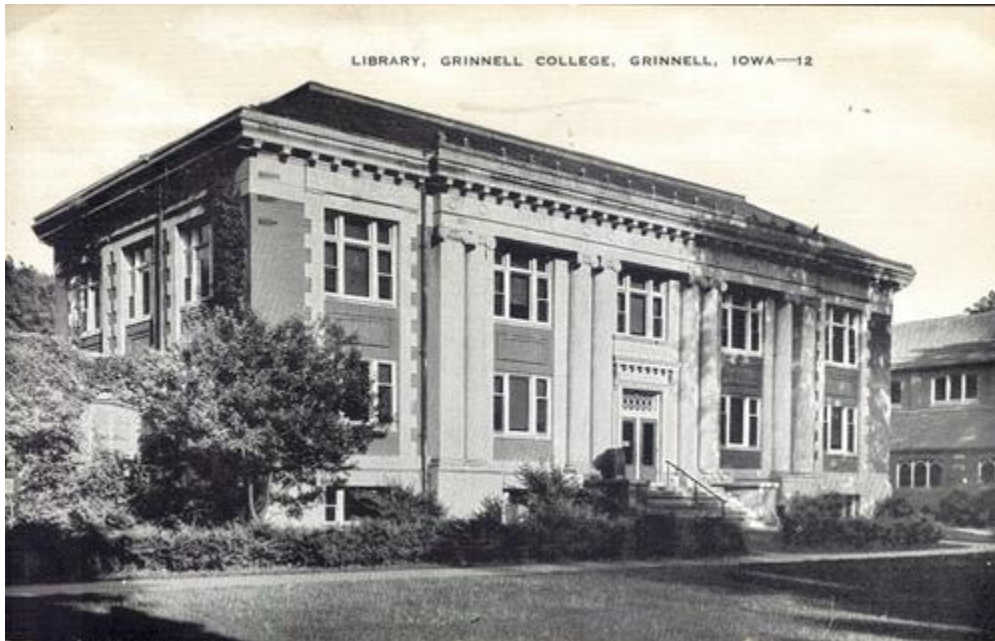
In June 1935 Carnegie had reached its volume capacity of 100,000. Over the next 21 years Carnegie's volume count continued to grow, leaving the college at a crossroads. After some deliberation, Grinnell yet again was on the search for a new home for their vast collection of books, and in 1956 the Board of Trustees approved a plan for a new library, Burling Library, which stands as the college's main library to this day. After

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<sup>6</sup> Walker, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Magazine, Grinnell. n.d. "Grinnell's Evolving Libraries | Grinnell Magazine." Magazine.grinnell.edu. Accessed May 15, 2024. <https://magazine.grinnell.edu/news/grinnells-evolving-libraries>.

serving as Grinnell College's main library for nearly 55 years, in 1959 Carnegie was officially retired as the college's library and a new era for the building was imminent.



West side view of Carnegie Hall, 1946. Publisher: E.C. Kropp Co.

A Grinnell College Board of Trustees meeting in January 1959 marked the day of reckoning for Carnegie. In this meeting a motion to transform Carnegie into a multifunctional space passed. As its functions changed so did its name, Carnegie Library was replaced with its modern day name, Carnegie Hall. The new functions of Carnegie included faculty offices, classrooms, the college's bookstore, and the campus mail services were moved to Carnegie's basement. Part of this transition meant renovations within the walls of Carnegie, and the subsequent renovations were mapped out by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM) with the construction contract being awarded to Weitz Construction Co. out of Des Moines.<sup>8</sup> The plan created by SOM intended to create an additional 17,000 square feet in the upper two levels for classrooms and offices, develop spaces for the campus bookstore and mailrooms in the

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<sup>8</sup> Walker, 6.

lower levels, as well as the inclusion of air conditioning for the whole building. The cost of renovations rose from the initial estimation of \$170,000 to a final total cost of \$204,000.<sup>9</sup>



Grinnell College Mailroom, 1996. Publisher: Grinnell College Archives

Throughout the next 20 years Carnegie remained steady in its functionality, but this steadiness of functionality didn't come without physical change. In 1970 the campus bookstore added 3000 additional square feet of space costing \$70,000, and in 1981 the mailroom underwent a comprehensive renovation designed by Dale Hawn. The renovations cost \$41,000 as the mailroom was overhauled with changes including new mailboxes, a reorganized spatial layout, and a new conveyor belt system.<sup>10</sup> The remodel of the Carnegie mailroom lasted for 24 years until Grinnell, in 2005, finished its project of the Joe Rosenfield Center which now houses the campus

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<sup>9</sup> Walker, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Walker, 7.

mail room along with many other purposes.<sup>11</sup> Today the remnants of the mailroom are featured in an alcove on the south side of the Humanities and Social Sciences Center (HSSC). The alcove utilizes old Carnegie mailboxes which hold the names of those who gifted \$50,000 or more to the HSSC's construction along with an image or message from the respective donor.<sup>12</sup> The campus bookstore in Carnegie outlasted the mailroom due to the addition of the Pioneer Bookshop in the early 2000's, but even the bookstore was moved out of Carnegie as the two shops combined to create a new Pioneer Bookshop off campus in 2016.<sup>13</sup>

The resurrection of the aforementioned HSSC marked the end of Carnegie Hall's over 100 year history as a stand alone building. The HSSC is the pride and joy of Grinnell College's arsenal of campus buildings, boasting 40 classrooms and nearly 150 faculty offices.<sup>14</sup> Construction for the HSSC began in 2017, but not after recognition for the importance of preserving what came before. Rick Whitney, assistant vice president for facilities management had this to say when speaking about the construction of the

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<sup>11</sup> Wolfe, Oliver. 2023. "Ode to the Empty Spaces of Grinnell College." *The Scarlet & Black*. April 10, 2023.  
<https://thesandb.com/42491/article/ode-to-the-empty-spaces-of-grinnell-college/>.

<sup>12</sup> Teuber, Abraham. 2019. "Carnegie Mailroom Installation Memorializes HSSC Donors." *The Scarlet & Black*. August 30, 2019.  
<https://thesandb.com/30909/article/carnegie-mailroom-installation-memorializes-hssc-donors/>.

<sup>13</sup> Grinnell College. 2016. "Bookstores to Be Closed June 18 – July 4 While Moving." Grinnell College. June 1, 2016.  
<https://www.grinnell.edu/news/bookstores-be-closed-june-18-july-4-while-moving>.

<sup>14</sup> Grinnell College. 2019. "Humanities and Social Studies Center (HSSC)." Grinnell College. 2019.  
<https://www.grinnell.edu/about/leadership/offices-services/institutional-planning/campus-plan/hssc>.



HSSC, “ It’s one of the most impressive jobs in terms of truly respecting the architect’s plan of retaining and celebrating the heritage of ARH and Carnegie.”<sup>15</sup>



Construction of the HSSC, Carnegie pictured on the right, 2017. Publisher: Grinnell College

The heritage of Carnegie hall runs deep through Grinnell and the surrounding community. Daniel Kaiser, senior faculty member at Grinnell College, was asked about what he enjoyed most about Carnegie when he had an office in the building in the late 1970s. He responded, “in a building like Carnegie where you have all these offices, hallways became places for conversation with faculty and students...I always enjoyed that aspect of it.”<sup>16</sup> Kaiser went on to tell a number of stories he could remember of conversations and interactions he was involved in and witnessed inside Carnegie Hall. One of the interactions Kaiser recalled involved a student, Marshall Poe, and former

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<sup>15</sup> Shapiro, Jeremy. 2020. “Extensive ARH, Carnegie Hall Renovations Nearly Complete - Grinnell College.” [Alumni.grinnell.edu](https://alumni.grinnell.edu/news/arh-and-carnegie-renovations). May 5, 2020. <https://alumni.grinnell.edu/news/arh-and-carnegie-renovations>.

<sup>16</sup> Kaiser, Daniel. 2024. Dan Kaiser on Carnegie Hall Interview by Danny Quirk and Seth Semmen.

professor, Poland Vermin. He details the interaction comparing it to an infamous Lyndon B. Johnson photo in which Johnson's cabinet was confronting him and he was exaggeratedly leaning back. Kaiser also remembered the long conversations he would have with the janitors on his floor. He said the janitors were always keen to sit down and have a conversation with him about whatever may be going on in either of their lives. Kaiser says he misses those interactions and believes Carnegie Hall's floor plan was the main contributor in facilitating these conversations.<sup>17</sup> These small anecdotes provide a glimpse into the daily interactions and sense of community that has existed in Carnegie Hall throughout its extensive history.

Hallet and Rawson Co. are responsible for the architecture and layout of Carnegie Hall. They began with a three-level building layout featuring a rectangular main section stretching 110 feet by 50 feet. Adjacent to the main rectangle they devised a plan for a 2 level area immediately to the east of the main portion of Carnegie. This design yielded a building approximating 21,700 square feet.<sup>18</sup> At the time of construction the lower level of the building housed storage rooms, restrooms, recitation rooms, and cloakrooms. The second level of Carnegie hosted stacks of bookshelves, reading areas, and administrative offices. On the third level there were librarian offices, cataloging rooms, and another reading room able to host over 100 students at a time.<sup>19</sup>

Today Carnegie, as a part of the HSSC, is primarily used for office spaces along with one of the few faculty lounges to be found around campus. The basement is no longer accessible and each floor above has lost all of its original functionality.

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<sup>17</sup> Kaiser.

<sup>18</sup> Walker, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Walker, 5.



Southwest view of Carnegie Hall, 2008. Grinnell College

The architectural style of Carnegie Hall is characterized as modified classical. Carnegie possesses features such as red brick walls positioned in between roman style columns surrounding the building. A low hipped roof with names engraved into the stone cap off the building's grand architectural design.<sup>20</sup> The names engraved into the building are as follows: Caesar, Isaiah, Emerson, Shakespear, Dante, Homer, Plato, Michelangelo, Darwin, Goethe, and Galilleo. The names were selected to depict Andrew Carnegie's vision of human civilization within the realms of historical, cultural, political, and social dimensions.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Walker, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Grinnell College. 2021. "Inscriptions for the Future." Grinnell College. 2021. <https://www.grinnell.edu/academics/centers-programs/humanities/inscriptions-future>

When tracing the journey of Carnegie Hall, it becomes evident that its evolution mirrors the progressive nature of Grinnell College itself. From its inception as a solution to the college's library problem, Carnegie has transcended its original purpose. As its halls echoed with the footsteps of students, faculty, and visitors over the decades, Carnegie Hall housed far more than just books. It housed stories from individuals who spent days, months, if not years interacting in and around its hallways. The architectural beauty of Carnegie stands as a testament to the spirit of Andrew Carnegie's philanthropic vision. Through this spirit Carnegie Hall emerges not just as a physical place but as a living entity signifying the history of Grinnell as a whole within itself.

Through the almost 120 year history of Carnegie Hall has proven itself as an embodiment of Grinnell College and its students alike. The halls within have heard from students across generations bearing witness to the growth and evolution of each and everyone of those students. Although not the architectural wonder it once was, Carnegie Hall's legacy endures, similar to Grinnell College's, through its visions of adaptability and progress.

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