

Byram Shubert Library A History



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Introduction

The Byram Shubert Library is part of the Greenwich public library system. It was opened in 1974, after having been planned since 1970. The brick and wood, one-story building was designed by R. Marshall Christensen. The landscape architect was William Rutherford of Riverside. The builder was the Sam Grasso Company of Darien Connecticut.¹ The cost was approximately \$350,000. The Sam S. Shubert Foundation donated most of the money for the library, which is named for the John Shubert as well as the Byram. Kerrtu (Mrs. John) Shubert was one of the prime movers in the library's construction. Additional funds were raised by the community. The Byram branch library has served the community since the early 1930s.

Byram Shubert Library History

The present building was planned from 1970.² The Byram Shubert Library Building Committee provided a basic program for the building. There was to be a 3,000 square foot open plan building with the capacity to be expanded to 8,000 square feet. A community center or meeting room was discussed as a potential later addition. The exterior, located in a residential area, was meant to be welcoming, with no institutional aspect. The interior was meant to be comfortable and homey – Mrs. Shubert stated in 1973 that she wanted it to be warm and friendly.³

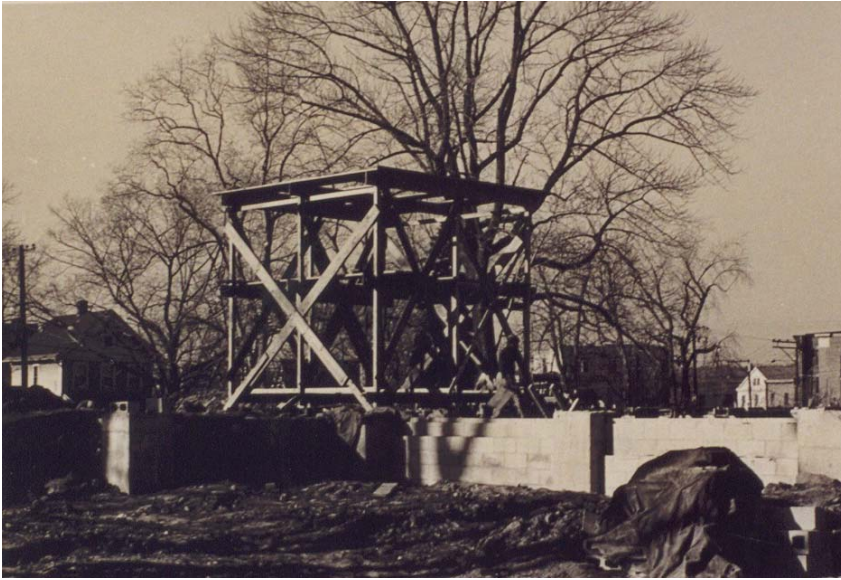


*Byram Shubert Library
Under Construction,
c1973
(Byram Shubert Library
Collection)*

¹ Vertical Files in the Byram Shubert Library, including press releases, "Byram-Shubert Branch Library Building Program: Architect Interviews – Wednesday, July 22 and Friday, July 24, 1970," a 1974 account of the construction costs, and newspaper clippings.

² "Byram-Shubert Branch Library Building Program, Architect Interviews – Wednesday, July 22, and Friday, July 24, 1970" in Vertical Files.

³ "Topping Off at Byram" 9/26/1973 Press Release in Vertical Files.



*Byram Shubert
Foundations and
Center Structure,
c1973
(Byram Shubert
Library Collection)*

Children's and adults' reading areas were called for, as well as an audio visual area and separate staff space. All of these spaces were incorporated into the new building, which eventually reached 4,000 square feet upon completion. The lighting was meant to be recessed fluorescent, with no visible ceiling fixtures.

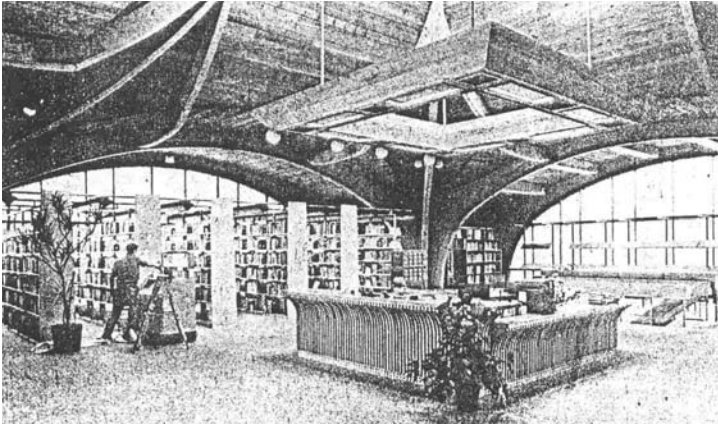


*Children at Byram Shubert
Library Groundbreaking
Ceremony, c1972
(Byram Shubert Library
Collection)*

The land was owned by the Town of Greenwich and was leased for 99 years to the library. It is adjacent to the New Lebanon School, which was built in 1959. The property was considered to have a number of advantages over the old site on Mill Street, including more parking, larger facilities, and it was closer to the school.

The library cost about \$370,000. The Sam S. Shubert Foundation initially donated \$250,000 for the library but ultimately gave \$325,000. Byram resident Kerrtu (Mrs. John) Shubert was the guiding figure behind the grant. The community raised \$34,000 to pay for the meeting and exhibit room addition. Additional funds came from investment of the money.

The building was opened on March 17, 1974. A custom designed wooden charge desk was placed in the center of the space, under the rectangular wooden skylight, for visual control of the entire library. There is a larger new desk there now but part of the original charge desk is still in the library, used as a counter in the exhibition room.



*Interior in 1974 with original charge desk and original round track lights
(Daily Item, 3/25/1974 in Byram Shubert Library Collection)*

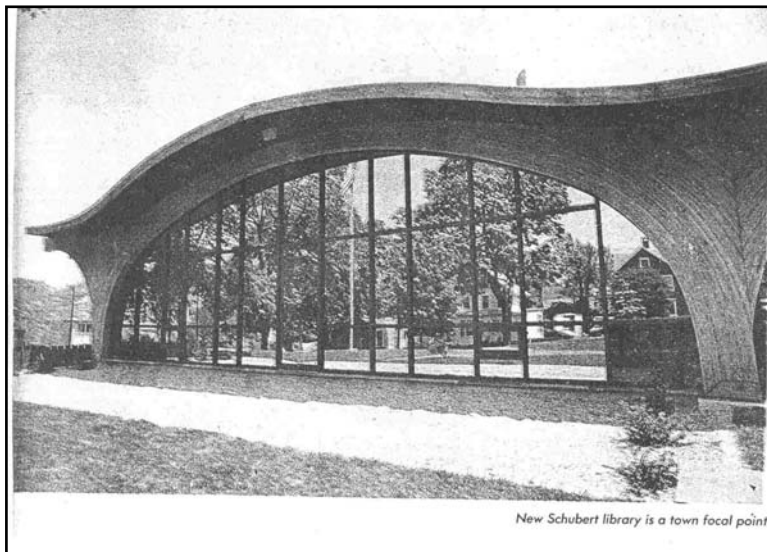


Remaining part of charge desk, now in library exhibit room, 2004

Greenwich Time (3/14/1974) described the library building was described as an architectural gem when it opened. The style was called contemporary but the prominent laminated wood beams paired with brick walls, curvilinear forms and large expanses of glass are features reminiscent of Scandinavian Modern.

There have been alterations to the building in the last 30 years. The original building was basically square, with four curved laminated wood trusses meeting at a rectangular wood framed skylight. There were large multi-paned glass windows at three facades and a brick entrance with curved edges at the north.

A foundation was built to the west for expansion at a later time. There was a patio on that side that was removed for landscaping. The building was expanded instead at the east by one bay. The multi-paned glass window was kept at the upper level and the center but filled in by brick walls on the sides.



New Schubert library is a town focal point

Byram Shubert Library East Façade, *Sunday Magazine*, June 12, 1977
(Byram Shubert Library Collection)



Byram Shubert Library, 1974
Byram Shubert Library 2004 showing the addition to the east façade at right
(1974 Photo, Byram Shubert Library Collection)



Byram Shubert Library, 1974 and 2004, showing north and west facades
(1974 Photo, Byram Shubert Library Collection)

Byram Library History

From the 1930s to the 1950s, the Byram library was located on Delavan Avenue and Mead Street, just a block away from the present library. The building was razed for the construction of a new firehouse, which is still on site (photo below).⁴



*Present Firehouse on Mead & Delavan,
on Site of Old Byram Library, 2004*

While funds for a new library were originally in the budget, they were cut by the time the firehouse was built. In 1952 when the selectmen told Byram that there was no money in the budget for a library, the Bridgeport Herald reported “Byram Broods as Buffs Boot Books.” At the time there were 8,000 books in the collection. The New Lebanon School teachers donated their staff room for a children’s library while the adult library was moved to a small store on Mill Street. After a great deal of lobbying by the community, the old firehouse building on Mill Street was renovated into a library and dedicated in 1954. The historic building still exists today and is being used for professional offices and apartments. The Byram Library moved to the present structure in 1974.



*Byram Branch on Mill Street
(Byram Shubert Library Collection)
Former Firehouse and Library on Mill Street,
2004*



⁴ “Trials and Tribulations of the Byram Library” undated and unattributed history in the vertical files.

R. Marshall Christensen

R. Marshall Christensen lived in the Byram neighborhood of Greenwich when he was chosen to design the library. He said his intent was to blend the building into the beautiful woodland site as well as to harmonize with the adjacent New Lebanon School.⁵ The architect was responsible for the Perkins Study Center (1967) at the Riverdale Country School, River Campus on West 248th Street and Spaulding's Lane in the Bronx. Like the Greenwich library, the study center has a unique roof: "two concave surfaces which approach one another but never quite kiss, leaving a skylight at the ridge."⁶ In New York City, Christensen designed Convent of the Church of St. Paul the Apostle in 1950 and the residence at 22 East 84th Street in 1961.⁷



*Byram Shubert Library
Groundbreaking, c 1972
From left: Nolan Lushington,
library director; R. Marshall
Christensen, architect; Sam
Grasso, builder; Mrs. Shubert;
Mrs. Amedee Cole, Greenwich
Library Board of Trustees
president; First Selectman
William Lewis*

*(Byram Shubert Library
Collection, newspaper photo,
no attribution)*

⁵ Press release at Byram Shubert library, 6/28/1971.

⁶ Elliot Willensky and Norval White, *AIA Guide to New York City*, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988, p. 531. The building is also mentioned in Robert Stern et. al. *New York 1960*, NY: Evergreen, 1995, p.952.

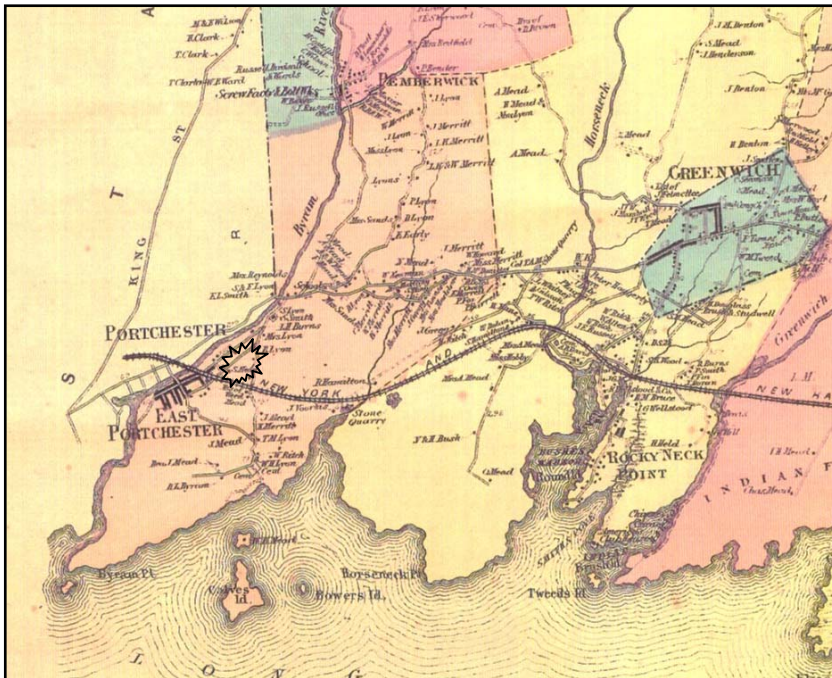
⁷ *NY Times* 3/8/1966, p. 18; 3/20/1950, p. 16; 9/9/2001, p. RE9.

Byram History

The Byram neighborhood has a long history.⁸ It was farmland owned by the Lyons and Mead families, among others. Mr. Mead named the area Meadville, but relented and called it New Lebanon, after the neighborhood's cedar trees, reminiscent of the Cedars of Lebanon. By the time Mead died in 1906 the area was called East Portchester. In 1947 the residents named the community Byram, after the Byram River and the 17th century "Byram Neck."

In the mid-19th century some of the farmland was sold and parceled into small lots for workers' housing. The area was filled with Italian, Czech, Slovakian, Polish, Scandinavian and German immigrants who worked in the nearby industries along the Byram River and the foundries and factories in Port Chester, NY. The land fronting the Long Island Sound was developed into summer estates for the wealthy by the end of the 19th century. John Shubert lived in one of these homes.

In the 1950s the construction of I-95 divided Byram in two parts, with the waterfront estates on the east and the workers' and middle class houses on the west. The area has changed since the 1970s. The workers housing has been renovated and upgraded and new development occurred, changing the once ethnic working and middle class neighborhood. Many of the estates were broken up and developed into lots. The popular Byram Beach Park, acquired in 1918, was built on the Ritch family bluestone quarry along the Sound.



Map of Greenwich, no date, Byram is at far right, named East Portchester, library site marked with star

(Byram Shubert Library Collection)

⁸ NY Times 2/28/1993, p. R7. The information for the Byram neighborhood history comes from this article, the exterior library placque, and *Byram Connecticut*, James Smith, eagle Scout, 2000.