

## **A Brief History of the Somerset County Library System and Bridgewater Headquarters**

The Somerset County Library System (SCLS) has come a long way from the early "book truck" days when the residents of Bridgewater Township received library service once a month from a 1930 Ford truck. Now patrons can access the holdings of the Library through the Internet on their home or work computer and have the items delivered to their library the next day. This year the Somerset County Library System is celebrating 70 years of Library Service.

The Somerset County Library System organized in 1930. The Library began in a room in the Somerville Public Library, which it occupied for a period of 3 months prior to its move to the Jacob Todd House, 26 North Bridge Street, Somerville. The library's budget in 1930 was \$8,490.00.

The Somerset County Library System was organized so that local libraries could obtain books too expensive for them to purchase or books of a special nature, loan books to public and private schools, provide stimulus for public libraries in communities, and to have a bookmobile service to serve rural sections.

Ms. Dorothy Van Gorder was the first County Library Director and served for over thirty years until her retirement in 1962. When Ms. Van Gorder came to Somerset County, only Bernardsville and Basking Ridge were established libraries eligible for County assistance. Somerville and Bound Brook were already separate independent municipal libraries. Through her leadership, eight association libraries were formed: Bedminster, Franklin Township, Manville, North Plainfield, Peapack-Gladstone, Raritan, Warren and Washington Valley in Martinsville. Ms. Van Gorder was instrumental in bringing library service to rural communities in Somerset County that had no municipal library. She often drove the book truck herself.

The Somerset County Library System served its patrons primarily through bookmobile service. The Library also served its patrons through direct borrowing at its Somerville location. The first library "book truck" was purchased in the summer of 1930 and could hold about 500 books. It stopped at schools, libraries, and "centers", which were private homes and stores that had set aside space for Somerset County Library books. By the end of 1932, there were 37 libraries and centers and 63 schools on the monthly rounds of the bookmobile.

In 1950, a new modern custom-made bookmobile was purchased. The new could travel in inclement weather, unlike the old book truck that could only be used in clear weather since the books were setup outdoors. For the first time, patrons were able to walk in and around the racks of the bookmobile.

In 1952, the Somerset County Library became the first county unit to relocate to the new County Administration building on the corner of high and North Bridge Streets in Somerville where it remained until 1980. The Library was expanded several times in this building to accommodate the growing collection. In 1967, the Library commissioned a new mammoth bookmobile that was 30-feet long. The custom made bookmobile had heat and air-conditioning. The bookmobile could hold more than 3,000 volumes and had fluorescent lighting inside for night use.

In the late 1960's, the Library Commission looked into embarking on building program for the library, which had become too cramped for space in its wing of the County building. The Commission hired a consulting firm to look into potential sites for the new library. Proposals

included merging the County Library with the Somerville Library into a single library building in Somerville, merging the County Library with the Somerset County College Library, and building a new Headquarters Library in Bridgewater Township on County owned land. In the mid 1970's, the proposal for a new headquarters for the County Library began to gain public support. The Bridgewater and Branchburg League of Women Voters pressed for moving the County Library to Bridgewater because the Township did not have a library to serve its residents, even though Bridgewater was the second largest municipality in the County. Bridgewater Township residents received library service through the monthly stops of the bookmobile and through the Washington Valley Station in Martinsville.

The League of Women Voters proposed a joint facility, which would serve as a Branch Library for the residents of Bridgewater and a location for the Somerset County Library System headquarters. In 1977, the Library Commission hired an architectural firm, Bouman, Blanch, and Fariday, to sketch plans for a joint library facility in Bridgewater. An agreement was made that Bridgewater would provide 55.8% of the funds and Somerset County 44.2% of the funds for operating the library. A site on County-owned land on North Bridge Street and Vogt Drive was chosen. The cost for the new Somerset County/Bridgewater Library was \$3.5 million.

In 1981, the new Somerset County/Bridgewater Library was opened. It was five times larger than the Library's location in the Somerset County Administration building in Somerville. It was the first cooperative library venture between a county and municipality in the state. It featured a separate children's room with a storytelling pit, a large adult service area with a lounge area for reading, community meeting rooms, a film department and a Quiet Study Room. The Somerset County/Bridgewater Library provides library service to the residents of Bridgewater and also houses the functions of the Somerset County Library System such as administration, delivery services, central book ordering and processing, backup reference service to smaller Branch Libraries and other county services.

In April of 1999, the SCLS Headquarters / Bridgewater Library began a major building renovation. The Library was completely renovated so that existing space was made more efficient for both patrons and staff. There was 7,300 additional square feet added to the building, increasing the total area of the building to almost 52,500 square feet. The renovation project greatly expanded the Children's Department, doubling it in size, relocated the Reference Desk to be more accessible to patrons, added more shelving and seating in the Adult Services Department, created a comfortable space for young adults, and added computer work stations for the public.

The Bridgewater Library is located at 1 Vogt Drive. Residents of the member municipalities are eligible for a free card. People who work, go to school, or own property in one of the member municipalities are also eligible for a free card. The member municipalities are Bound Brook, Branchburg, Bridgewater, Green Brook, Hillsborough, Millstone, Montgomery, North Plainfield, Peapack-Gladstone, Rocky Hill, South Bound Brook, Warren Township and Watchung. People who do not have a Somerset County Library System card may use the Library's materials in-house. Patrons may use their card at any branch Library of the Somerset County Library System and may also have books sent from any of the Branch Libraries to their local Branch Library for pick-up. Branch Libraries are located in Bound Brook, Bridgewater, Hillsborough, North Plainfield, Peapack-Gladstone, Hill, Warren, and Watchung, and two lending stations in Branchburg and Martinsville.

For further information regarding the Somerset County Library System, contact the Bridgewater Library at (908) 526-4016.

Compiled by the staff of the Somerset County Library System  
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Bridgewater Library

## **FAST FACTS ABOUT THE SOMERSET COUNTY LIBRARY SYSTEM**

1. The Somerset County Library System was organized in 1930 to
  - enable local libraries to obtain books that were too expensive for local libraries to purchase on their own
  - loan books to public and private schools
  - provide stimulus for public libraries in communities
  - provide a bookmobile service to serve rural sections
2. The library's budget in 1930 was \$8,490.00.
3. The first bookmobile was a maroon Model T Ford and contained 500 books.
3. Walter W. Whiton was the Library Commissioner who pushed for a traveling library. It was approved on July 18, 1930.
4. On August 8, 1930, the Commission opened the County Library Headquarters at the former Jacob Todd house at 26 N. Bridge St. in Somerville. It employed two staff.
5. In its first year, the library lent about 300 books each day through its many stations in private homes, schools and barbershops.
6. Ms. Dorothy Van Gorder was the first County Library Director and served for over thirty years until her retirement in 1962.

7. By the end of 1932, there were 37 libraries and centers and 63 schools on the monthly rounds of the bookmobile.
8. In 1952, the Somerset County Library became the first county unit to relocate to the new County Administration building on the corner of High and North Bridge Streets in Somerville where it remained until 1980.
9. In 1981, the new Somerset County/Bridgewater Library was opened. It was five times larger than the Library's location in the Somerset County Administration building in Somerville. The cost was \$3.5 million.
10. In April of 1999, the Somerset County/Bridgewater Library began a major building renovation. A total of 7,300 additional square feet was added to the building, increasing the total area of the renovated building to almost 52,500 square feet.
11. This facility serves as the branch library for Bridgewater and the headquarters for the Somerset County Library System.
12. In 2005, the Somerset County Library System celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary. This same year, it served over 100,000 patrons and circulated almost 2 million items.
13. In 2005, the seven libraries had more than 20 million items of books, newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, DVDs, videotapes and sound recordings. It also employed 219 people.
14. In 2006, Bound Brook Memorial Library joined the system. To date, there are eight member libraries: Bridgewater (Headquarters), Hillsborough, Mary Jacobs Library in Rocky Hill, North Plainfield, Peapack-Gladstone, Watchung, Warren Township, and Bound Brook. Two stations are also part of the system: Branchburg in Neshanic Station and Washington Valley in Martinsville. These stations are staffed by volunteers.

Compiled by the staff of the Somerset Library Library System, Youth Services Reference Department, Bridgewater, NJ, October, 2006.