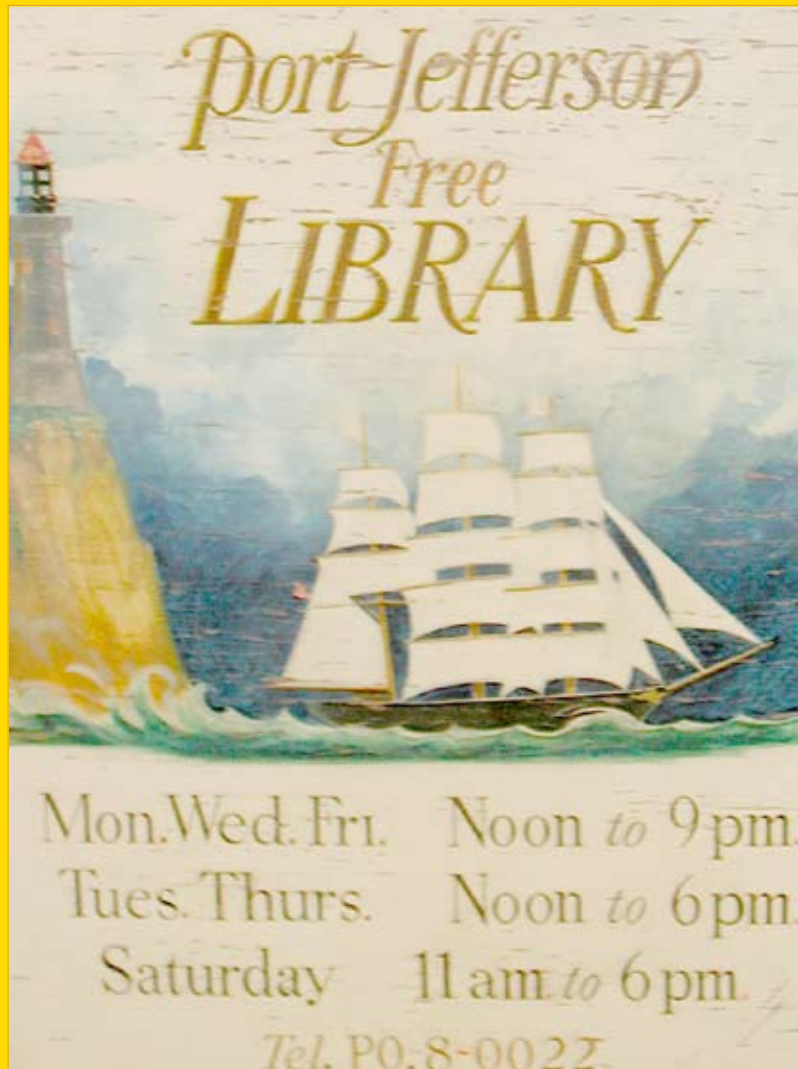


# A HISTORY OF THE PORT JEFFERSON FREE LIBRARY



written by Earlene O'Hare  
layout & design by Valerie Schwarz  
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**On the Cover:** This library sign, dating from circa 1960, was lost for many years and was recently found in an attic by a local resident. In 2005, the resident kindly returned the sign to the library where it can now be seen just inside the front door.

## A History of the Port Jefferson Free Library

Although there had been some discussions about starting a public library in Port Jefferson as early as the 1890s, nothing came of them until 1908 when the Ladies Literary Society of Port Jefferson, a group which included many of the leading women of the community, decided to take action. On March 8 of that year they voted to organize a library and shortly thereafter leased a room on the second floor of the C.F. Robbins grocery store for \$3 a month, payable in advance. The Robbins store (later the Hulse store and eventually torn down) stood on the southwest corner of what is now East Broadway and East Main Street.



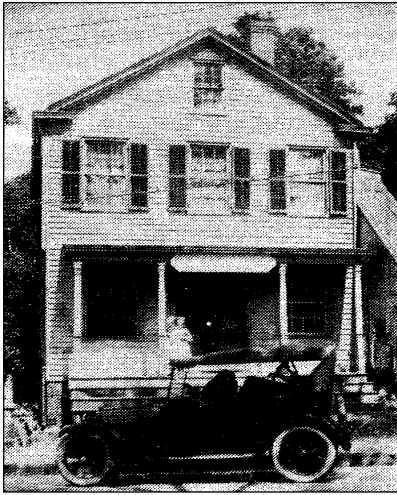
The library's home from 1908 to 1911 was the second floor of the C. F. Robbins grocery store, on the left in the photo above.  
*From the Kenneth Brady collection.*

Unlike many communities, Port Jefferson did not have a wealthy benefactor to fund its library, and the women of the Literary Society had to struggle to raise the required funds and to secure book donations. They collected paper, fastened it in bundles, and shipped it to New York, where they were paid \$5 a ton. They also held bake sales and entertainments for which a fee was charged.

On June 26, 1908 the library was opened to the public for the first time with 375 volumes on the shelves. Shortly after the opening, it was decided to temporarily close the library while the books were being cataloged. As a result the library did not officially open until November 1908. At first the library was open for charging out books only on Saturday afternoons and for reading and studying three evenings a week. By the end of June 1909, there were 733 books in the collection, circulation for the year was 3,000, and there were 215 borrowers.

On November 22, 1909 a meeting was held to incorporate the library. It was voted to name the association the Port Jefferson Free Library, as it was intended to be "free for public use to the inhabitants of Port Jefferson." The incorporation was filed in the Office of the Secretary of State in Albany and with the Suffolk County Clerk in Riverhead on December 16, 1909. Seven trustees were elected (Alice Randall Ritch, the president of the Ladies Literary Society, and her husband Thomas Jefferson Ritch, Jr., Rosa Bayles, Emma Wells, Cornelia Moger, James Bayles, and the Rev. J. Morris Coerr) and a constitution was adopted.

Trustee Emma Wells was named librarian and, starting May 1, 1910, was given a salary of \$1 a week. On April 1 of that year the first accession book was started for recording books as they were added to the collection. At that time there were 980 books.



The Good Templar's Hall as it appeared when the library occupied the first floor (1911-1925).



The same building on East Main Street as it appears today. (2008)



The library in 1922 was on one floor and the other floor was used by community groups.

The University of the State of New York granted the library a Provisional Charter on December 16, 1909 with the stipulation that an absolute charter would be granted only if the library were able to acquire \$1000 worth of property within five years. Only six months later, Thomas J. Ritch, the president of the association, was authorized to purchase the building "generally known as Good Templar's Hall" for the amount of \$1500, thus fulfilling the conditions for the absolute charter, which was granted August 29, 1912.

The library moved into the first floor of its new quarters on April 1, 1911, while renting out the second floor for additional income. The Good Templar's Hall, also known as the Temperance Hall, is a Greek Revival building that still stands on East Main Street, just north of the Baptist Church. This 20 x 50 foot building was to serve as the library for fourteen years until a permanent home was built.

The efforts to raise money for a permanent library were hampered by the fact that most of the funds that the trustees were able to gather through benefits, sales, and contributions had to go towards the operating expenses of the library. A committee of fourteen prominent community leaders was chosen to extend their influence to raise more funds, but the advent of World War I put a halt to these activities. At the end of the war the trustees proposed to the community that a memorial to those who lost their lives in the war be built in the form of a new library. Adelaide Willse Wilson, one of the original Literary Society ladies, had bequeathed a house and its property to the library, and it was planned to erect a two-story War Memorial Library on this land, with the library taking over the first floor and the Wilson Ritch Post of the American Legion the second. In spite of the efforts of trustees and supporters, the War Memorial Library drive failed. Of the estimated \$25,000 that would be needed, only \$3,800 was raised.

The economic climate began to improve, however, and less than 18 months later a new drive was started. The library sold the Wil-

son property for \$2,550 and was now receiving \$2,000 a year from the school district as well. A new librarian, Harry N. W. Magill, was hired at \$1,200 a year. He was a cultivated and lively man and he soon became an enthusiastic and well-liked member of the community. He was a master of public relations, joining local organizations, giving prizes to students, and entering a float in the Fourth of July parade. During the first year of his tenure library circulation doubled, and in March 1922 he was charged with formulating plans for a new building.

It was originally planned to build a new library on the Good Templar's Hall site, but the owner of the adjacent property that was needed to expand the facilities refused to sell, and the library could not afford to buy an entirely new piece of property. Just when the situation seemed to be at an impasse, the Wilson Ritch American Legion post, then the second floor tenants of the Good Templar's Hall building, offered to buy the building for \$2,500. The trustees then learned that a piece of property at the corner of East Main Street and Thompson Street could be purchased for \$2,800. Both transactions were completed in October 1924. The house that stood on the Thompson Street property was sold and removed; Michael Stillman of Montclair, New Jersey, was retained as architect; and the cornerstone was laid on December 8, 1924. Alice Randall Ritch, the former president of the Ladies Literary Society who had been so instrumental in founding the library, was given a silver trowel to mark the occasion. (This trowel is now in the library's possession and can be viewed in the Friends of the Library's display case just inside the front door.)



The corner of East Main Street and Thompson Street in the early 1900s before the library was built on the property.

*From the Kenneth Brady collection.*



The interior of the library in the mid-1930s.



The same room, now the Adult Reading Room, as it appears today. (2008)

The resulting building, a handsome one-story edifice with a basement, was constructed of repressed red brick with limestone trim, measuring approximately 30 by 46 feet, with a frontage on East Main Street. The new library, at a cost of \$16,990, was opened to the public on May 1, 1925, with over 4,000 books and 25 periodical subscriptions. It is now the adult reading room of the library. The original librarian's desk and the original card catalog have been restored and can be seen in the room, along with some photographs from the library's early days.



The library shortly after its construction, 1924-25.

Mr. Magill died in the summer of 1931 and was succeeded by Helen Field, the first professional librarian to be employed by the library. She served the library for a total of 29 years, until she resigned in 1960 due to ill health.

Through the 1920s and 1930s the library continued to grow, eventually running out of space. This problem was temporarily solved with a 27 x 15-foot addition on the east side of the building to accommodate 8,000 books. This addition was completed in 1942.

In 1945 the trustees began to contemplate buying the property to the east of the library at 104 Thompson Street, with an eye toward future expansion. It was noted that the property was a fire hazard and an eyesore, with three years back taxes owing on it. The trustees decided to pay the back taxes as, according to law, they would then own the property after three years, if the owners did not redeem it during that time. On December 8, 1947 the trustees were surprised to receive a letter from the well-known news commentator, H. V. Kaltenborn, a summer resident of Setauket, saying that he had redeemed the property and was making a gift of the parcel to the library for future expansion. The back taxes that the library had paid were refunded and the building on the lot was torn down. The property was cleared, planted and fenced, and for the next twenty years served as a summer reading garden.



Radio news commentator H. V. Kaltenborn (1878-1965) in the late 1930s.



Children's story times had to share space with the adult book collection before the 1967 addition was built.

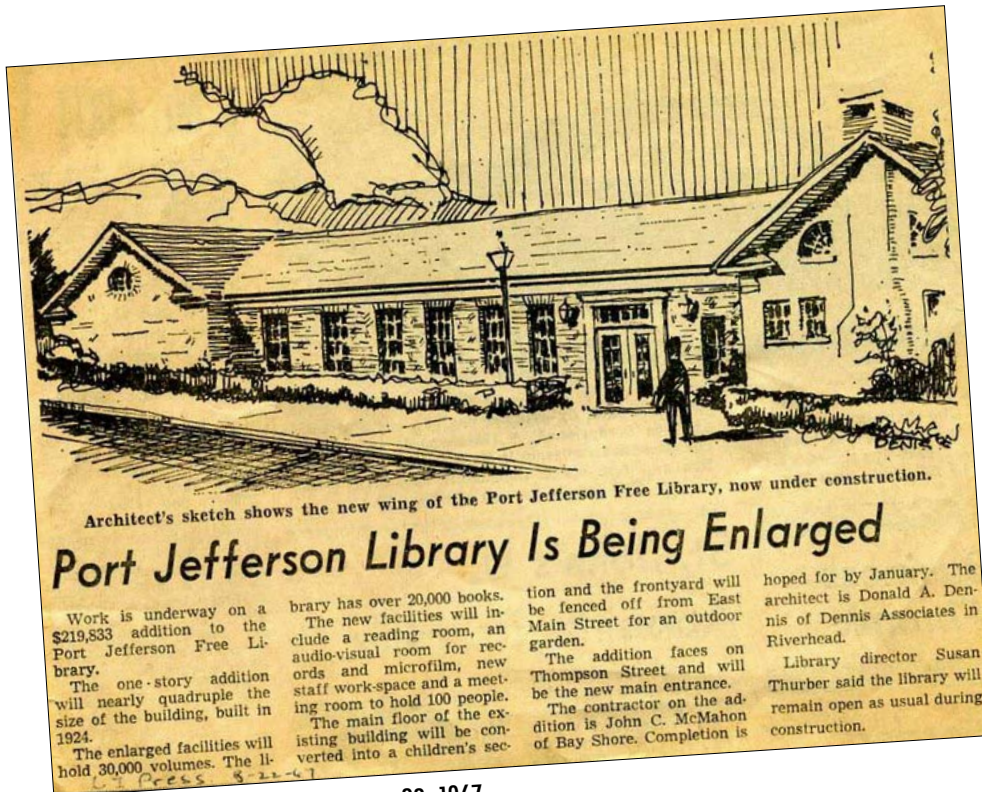
The library directors who served in the early 1960s-- Andrew Murray, John Weigel, and Susan Thurber-- oversaw a large increase in the size, breadth, and scope of the library. Phonograph records were first added in 1962; periodical subscriptions increased from 54 to 158; circulation increased from 50,000 to 60,000; and the staff had increased to nine. Particularly significant was the increase in juvenile cardholders, from 420 in 1959 to over 2,000 in 1965, largely due to Mr. Murray's outreach to the schools and Mr. Weigel's in



Even the presence of a photographer could not distract most children from the story being read in this photo from 1964 when the children's area of the library was near the fireplace.

stitution of children's reading clubs and story times. Library hours were also increased during this time, to 40 hours per week. In 1961 the library became a charter member of the Suffolk Cooperative Library System, allowing interlibrary loans to and from other libraries in the system.

The need for a library building program was obvious. At the school district budget vote of 1964, voters approved a proposal to raise by taxation \$35,000 a year for three years to fund a library building program, but the trustees had not as yet decided whether to expand the existing building on the Kaltenborn property or to build on another site.



From The Long Island Press, August 22, 1967.

The population of Port Jefferson was growing rapidly as well, and in 1963, the residents, concerned with this sudden growth and the direction it might take, voted to incorporate. The library trustees began to meet with the village trustees to discuss the possibility of locating the library in a complex of community structures near the harbor. After looking at the plans the library trustees raised many objections, chiefly the area's propensity for flooding and the impossibility of including a basement in the

building. During the months that

followed, the trustees investigated fifteen additional sites, none of which proved satisfactory. In the end they decided to expand the existing building. This decision met with general approval in the community. People liked the "charm and beau



Children registering for the 1970 Summer Reading Club in the newly renovated Children's Room.

ty" of the 1924 building; expanding would be less costly than erecting an entirely new building; and leaving East Main Street would strike a blow to an area already in decline. In March 1966, Denis Associates of Riverhead were retained as architects, and preliminary plans for an addition of 65 by 100 feet were approved in May. The 1942 addition was to be demolished to allow for the expansion.

On July 31, 1967, the board of trustees signed a contract for the addition, a one-story structure that would blend with the existing library and add 6,000 square feet to the 1924 building's 2,000 square feet, enabling the library to increase the size of its collection from 20,000 to 50,000 volumes. The plans called for a main entrance on Thompson Street, a large open area for reading and reference, an audiovisual room, staff workspace, a di-

rector's office, space for a meeting room in the basement, and a two-level stack area at the far eastern end. The 1924 building was to be converted to a children's library, with an outdoor garden on the East Main Street side. Construction began in August 1967 and was completed and opened to the public on Friday, August 23, 1968, at a cost of \$228,000.



The 1971 Summer Reading Club party was held in the garden outside the entrance to the 1924 building.

Funds were not available at that time to complete the meeting room in the basement. On July 14, 1971 voters turned down a \$50,000 proposal to accomplish this. After a vigorous letter-writing campaign explaining the wide range of activities that such a room could offer to the community—lectures, films, story hours, discussions, and a place for art exhibits—the proposal was successfully put before the community on August 30. With Denis Associates again as architects, the meeting room was completed and dedicated with a reception on April 22, 1972.

Norma Holmgren, the library director at that time, noted that registration and circulation had greatly increased over the past few years. The per capita circulation of 13.73, for example, was more than double the county average.

Miss Holmgren resigned in December 1972 to take a position with the Locust Valley Public Library, and Denis Kenney, who had been head of adult services at Comsewogue Public Library in Port Jefferson Station, was hired to take her place. About a year later Kenneth E. French, who had been the reference librarian at PJFL, began his twelve-year tenure as director.

Mr. French oversaw a number of innovations at the library. The Yeoman newsletter made its first appearance in November 1974. In 1976, faced with the discontinuation of the Suffolk Cooperative Library System's bookmobile service that had brought books to areas of the county without a library, Mount Sinai voters approved a contract for library service with Port Jefferson Free Library and Comsewogue Public Library. This arrangement continues to the present day, with Miller Place residents approving a similar service since the early 1980s.

With a view toward making library functions more efficient, a number of alterations were made to the library in September 1977. The library was closed for two weeks while the audio-visual room was expanded, the circulation desk area was re-arranged, a conference room and an office for professional staff were added in the basement, additional shelving was installed in the reference and children's areas and the children's room was repainted and re-carpeted.



Alterations to the circulation desk and office area of the library were made in 1977.

New technology continued to make an impact on the library. A stereo record player and cassette players were installed in the expanded audiovisual room, as well as a new microfilm/microfiche reader-printer that was needed to access the 20 periodicals whose back issues were now available in microform. The Magazine Index, a monthly index on microfilm to articles appearing in 350 periodicals, was added to supplement paper indexes. Cassettes, filmstrips, and 8mm films were added to the collection in 1978. Three separate inventories revealed that the library was losing more than 2% of its collection to theft every year, so in 1979 a security system was installed inside the main entrance. In 1981 the library began to circulate VHS videocassettes. Also that year the library joined with several others in the county to convert to an automated circulation system. All library materials were barcoded, and library patrons were issued new barcoded cards. The system went into effect in February 1982.

New services were also added during this time. The Suffolk Cooperative Library System had an extensive collection of movies in 16mm format. These were available for patrons to borrow, and the library availed itself of the collection as well, often showing one or two films a week. A career counselor was available several days a week. In 1979 the library began its very popular Sunday hours, one of the first libraries in the county to do so. Year after year Port Jefferson



Library had the highest per capita use of any library in Suffolk County. Double-digit increases in circulation over the previous year's figures were common. The number of reference questions answered increased by 57% from 1980 to 1981.

These advances did not come without growing pains, however. In June 1987, the library staff, frustrated with their inability to gain salary parity with surrounding districts, voted to form a staff association affiliated with New York State United Teachers. In November, after some resignations, including that of the director George Wagner, and months of negotiations, the staff, supported by many members of the community, voted to picket and strike if a contract agreement was not reached. Informational picketing did occur, but with the input of a New York State Mediation Board representative, a contract was finally agreed upon. This situation had a long-lasting effect on library governance, however. Because many residents felt that the trustees did not properly represent them, the board agreed to open the Port Jefferson Free Library Association and thus the ability to vote in trustee elections to all citizens 18 and older in the Port Jefferson School District. In December 1990 Michael McKenna, who had replaced Mr. Wagner, resigned and was replaced by Estherine Bonanno, who was to head the library through the next 15 years.



The library celebrated its 75th anniversary in 1984. Pictured are trustee Michael Mart, Director Kenneth French, trustees Lucille Taintor and Helene Coyle, and a couple of very young patrons.

Lack of space was another problem that worsened during the 1980s and early 1990s. The book stacks were filled beyond their intended capacity. New formats such as large print books, audiobooks and videocassettes needed more space. The Children's Library, in particular, was severely overcrowded. When Mount Sinai School District built its own middle school and high school and withdrew its students from Port Jefferson, the school district consolidated its secondary students into the high school building on Old Post Road, leaving the former junior high school on Spring Street vacant. A public meeting was held on October 29, 1992 to discuss the possibility of renovating the junior high school into a new library building. Reaction among the approximately 80 people who attended was positive. Accordingly, the board decided to put forth a proposal to the community to fund further plans and to develop an estimate of the cost of acquiring and renovating the building. The feasibility study vote, held on April 1, 1993, resulted in a tie vote—118 for, 118 against. Since even a simple majority requires one vote more than half, the proposal failed, and the board determined to pursue other plans.



The Children's Room, shown here decorated for the 1995 Summer Reading Club "Read the World Over," was colorful but extremely overcrowded.



Ground was broken in May 1996 for the library's largest construction project since 1967. Pictured are Board of Trustees president Laurence LaPointe, young patron Brianna Riis, former trustee Lucille Taintor, and Director Estherine Bonanno.

A survey conducted by the trustees indicated that many residents preferred that the library remain in its convenient downtown location. As a result, the board decided to develop plans to expand the library at its existing location and retained the firm of Mygatt/Perry as architects. On April 6, 1995 voters approved a \$2 million proposal to extend and improve the Port Jefferson Free Library at 100 Thompson Street. Aspects of the proposal included a Children's Library that would extend from the existing upper stack level into the parking space acquired in 1985, with additional bookstacks for the adult collection under it; an elevator, entry porch, and study porch along the Thompson Street side; and restoration of the original 1924 building for use as an adult reading room. The 8,834 square feet added would bring the total square footage of the library to 23,717. Additional property to the east on Thompson Street was also purchased at this time, to be used for parking.

Ground was broken in the spring of 1996 and the library remained open during the entire construction period. The dedication ceremony was held on Sunday, November 2, 1997. One aspect of the newly-renovated main room which drew particular notice was the installation of Internet computers for public use, although it was several months before they were actually available. One feature that had been an integral part of the library since its inception was missing – the card catalog. By 1996 the library had converted totally to an on-line public access catalog (OPAC) system.



The Thompson Street façade of the library before and after the construction of the entrance porch in 1997.





The Friends of the Port Jefferson Free Library was founded in 1998. Pictured are President Linda Gavin, Arthur Kleinfelder, Claire Blumberg, Harriet Martin, Peggy Meehan, and Sandra Swenk.

The Friends of the Port Jefferson Free Library, a volunteer organization of people interested in books and the library, was founded in February 1998. The Friends have worked to support and enhance the resources of the library through membership dues and sales of used books and other items. They have also sponsored programs for adults, children, and teens.

A small construction project, with Campani and Schwarting as architects, took place in 2003. The entry porch was enclosed and the Thompson Street façade was altered to make it more compatible with the character of the neighborhood.



150 East Main Street when it was a butcher shop.

In 2005 the Library building was officially placed on the National Register of Historic Places, a distinction designating it as worthy of preservation and restoration.



After fifteen years of service, Estherine Bonanno retired in 2006. The Board of Trustees hired Tara D'Amato, who had been Director at East Hampton and Quogue libraries, to take her place. Mrs. D'Amato has undertaken several small construction projects to make more efficient use of space, most notably transforming the 1967 audio-visual room into a room for public computer use.



Port Jeff Library@goodtimes opened in August 2007 at 150 East Main Street, a retail building dating to 1848.

The library's biggest undertaking of the young 21st century, however, has been the leasing of space at 150 East Main, directly across from the library, in the building that had been home to The Good Times Bookshop, which dealt in "scholarly, scarce, and out-of-print books." When the proprietors retired after more than 30 years in business, the trustees, staff, and many in the community felt the loss. The Friends of the Port Jefferson Free Library agreed to staff the front room of the store and supply it with good quality used books available for a modest donation. The sunny rear room of the store was felt to be an ideal location for a young adult library, a space that teens of the community could call their own with bright, comfortable furniture and books, CDs, DVDs, magazines, board and computer games, and laptop computers. The space was opened to the

public in August 2007, with the sign over the door reading “Port Jeff Library@ goodtimes,” a name voted on by members of the community. Wireless Internet access is provided by the library here, as well as in the main building, and at the Port Jefferson Village Center on the harbor.

If the ladies of the Literary Society were to return today they would see much that would astonish them—DVDs and CDs, the online catalog and computerized circulation system, the public Internet and word processing terminals, wireless capabilities, a collection of more than 177,000 items and a total circulation of more than 265,000. At the same time, they would see much that would be familiar to them—an East Main Street location, some of the very same books that they had added to the collection, and especially the continuing commitment of the trustees and staff to provide the people of Port Jefferson and surrounding communities with the very best in library service.



PORT JEFFERSON FREE LIBRARY  
OPENS TO THE PUBLIC FOR THE FIRST TIME

JUNE 26, 1908  
JUNE 26, 2008



CONGRATULATIONS ON 100 YEARS OF SERVICE!