

St. Petersburg Public Library, Mirror Lake Branch
280 Fifth Street North
Designated October 1990, HPC #90-02



Built in 1915 the Mirror Lake Library built is significant to the city's history as the first permanent home of the public library system and embodies the transformation of the city in the second decade of the twentieth century from a pioneer village to a city with viable cultural institutions. It is also an important as an example of Andrew Carnegie's philanthropy which has had a major impact on the development of American culture. In 1913, when the City of St. Petersburg was awarded a grant by the Carnegie Corporation to build the library, it was the culmination of a five-year pursuit spearheaded by Councilman Ralph Veillard, W.L. Straub, and Annie McCrae. The \$17,500 Carnegie grant was approved by the city and the Mirror Lake site chosen on July 17, 1914. Finally, the Mirror Lake Branch is also significant to the city's architectural history for being one of the earliest Beaux Arts style buildings designed in this area.

Andrew Carnegie considered public libraries the ideal medium for helping the "deserving poor." "I choose free libraries as the best agencies for improving the masses of the people, because they give nothing for nothing. They only help those who help themselves. They reach the aspiring, and open to these the chief treasures of the world—those stored in books. A taste for reading drives out the lower tastes." What had begun modestly in 1881 with a gift of a library building to his birthplace in Dunfermline, Scotland, would develop during the next three decades into an enterprise without parallel in the history of American philanthropy. By the time the last grant for this purpose was made in 1917, the list numbered 2509 free public libraries throughout the English speaking world, built at a cost of more than \$56 million. In the United States, 1,697 libraries were built and thirteen Carnegie grants for library buildings were given in Florida between 1901 and 1917; twelve to municipalities and one to Florida A&M University. Two cities, Pensacola and DeFuniak Springs, rejected their grants. The other ten grants built libraries in Bartow, Bradenton, Clearwater, Gainesville, Jacksonville, Ocala, Palmetto, St. Petersburg, Tampa and West Tampa.

The Beaux-Arts style, as evidenced by the State Theater and the Princess Martha Hotel, is a highly ornamental style of architecture that originated from the Ecole des beaux-arts which spawned a generation of American Neoclassical architects and buildings. It emphasizes a strongly symmetrical facade and may feature classical detailing, such as the dentils pilasters, and cornice returns found on the library. Neoclassicism taught classical, as well as exotic styles, and mixed the two for a unique effect. Henry D. Whitfield was the architect building. Whitfield worked for the Carnegie Corporation and designed the St. Petersburg library at his office at 160 Fifth Avenue in New York City. He was responsible for the designs of many libraries for the Carnegie Foundation across the nation in the Beaux Arts tradition.