



What's That
Schooner

Doing in the
Library?



By Laurie Higgins



A half-scale model of the Rose Dorothea sits permanently anchored in the library.

FOR BIBLIOPHILES LIKE ME, LIBRARIES ARE SACRED SPACES, CAPABLE OF inspiring awe. So it seems a happy coincidence of form meeting function that the new Provincetown Public Library is now in a building that was originally built as a Methodist church, because like a church, a library is a place where people go to learn more about themselves and more about things much bigger than themselves.

These repositories of knowledge are, of course, filled with books—glorious books that you can touch, browse, read, and best of all borrow. But a library is also a representation of the community it serves, and the new Provincetown Library shines in its recognition and celebration of the nautical history of a town filled with artists and fishermen, writers and fine craftsmen, as well as the more than occasional visitor.

In the years since it was built as the Center Methodist Episcopal Church in 1860, this historic building has had many uses. It was a Methodist church for close to a century, until 1958 when the congregation moved to their present location on Shank Painter Road. At that time Walter Chrysler Jr, son of the founder of the Chrysler Corporation, bought the building and converted it to an



art museum that remained open until 1970.

After being used briefly as a Center for the Arts, the building was empty until 1976, when the residents voted for the town to buy it and turn it into a local historical museum. The building itself was certified with the National Register of Historic Places in 1975, and the Provincetown Heritage Museum opened the following year and remained open seasonally until 2000.

In the meantime, the library trustees were looking for a new place to move. Just a few blocks away in a building given to the town by Nathan Freeman in 1873, the library was literally bursting at the seams with only 5,000 square feet of space to house an ever-expanding collection.

In 2001 the trustees were given the go-ahead at the town meeting to move into its new building. A massive capital campaign was launched, and to date close to 1,200 donors have given at least once, with many of them making several donations.

The library is still raising funds to complete the exterior of the building and to finish the lower level, which eventually will hold the majority of their collection and allow the specialized areas to expand— but it officially opened to the public on April 28, 2005.

Although it has not as yet been completely renovated, the exterior of the building is imposing. If you were to approach the town by sea, the new library is one of the most prominent and defining landmark buildings on the horizon.

Up close, it looms large over the smaller buildings surrounding it on Commercial Street. Perched on a small hill, the three-story building commands

respect, even with the belfry and bell sitting in the front yard awaiting repairs. The white clapboard exterior with Wren-baroque ornamentation and fifteen-foot-high windows all point to the building's history as a landmark, as indeed it is.

In the front corner of the lawn, a sculpture titled "Tourists" by Chaim Gross seems the perfect tribute to the visitors the library welcomes, especially during the summer, when the year-round population of 3,500 swells to 40,000. More than 100,000 people come through the library every year.

Library trustee Marcia Fair says that 70 percent of the year-round population have library cards and use the library. "And, of course, the Fine Arts Work Center uses it – the Center for Coastal Studies brings people in, the art association, the theater companies. It is a very well used library," she says.

One imagines that popularity will only continue to grow in this new location at the corner of Commercial and Center Streets.

Entering the massive front entrance, it is impossible not to pause in wonderment. The historic lobby with its restored grand staircases is spectacular. Two wide staircases curve up like outstretched arms, inviting you to explore the delights above that are hinted at through the large portholes halfway up.

The lobby has been painted the deep soft lavender of the night sky and a painting by John Dowd of the moon rising over Provincetown Harbor completes this imagery. The first floor is currently the home of all of the fiction, lined up on stacks that have been artfully topped with the original armrests from the pews of the church by Bill Ingraham, a master woodworker and the clerk of the works for the construction project.

Patrons quietly work at the six computers on one side of the room, and a friendly smile is assured at the circulation desk on the opposite side. In the back, a technology-free reading room offers a quiet sanctuary.

The grand staircases lead up to the second-floor children's room. The center attraction of the room is a sixty-two-foot-long half-scale model of the



Rose Dorothea, a Grand Banks fishing schooner that won the coveted Lipton Cup during the Boston-Gloucester Fisherman's Race in 1907.

On a nearby wall hangs the portrait of Francis "Flyer" Santos, the shipbuilder responsible for building the model between 1977 and 1988, when the building served as the Provincetown Heritage Museum.

"It was a happy accident," explains Karen MacDonald, director of operations at the library. "They built the boat and there was no way to get it out. It's like a ship in a bottle. You'd have to break the bottle."

After much discussion, town residents were asked to decide the fate of the boat. "It went before the town meeting twice and each time it was voted to keep it here and we're pleased with it," says Fair. "It makes our library unique from all other libraries in the universe."

Indeed it does, and the attention to detail is stunning in its scope. The masts of the ship soar up through the historic vaulted ceiling with holes cut in it to accompany them. In the dome of the second vault, blue globes on the light fixtures create a sky-like impression, while revolving lights on the deck of the ship create the illusion of water reflecting on the handmade sails.

The ship is surrounded by the children's stacks, which have been shaped like waves and painted blue. Streetlamp-style lighting is designed to create the feeling of a wharf.

Acoustic panels shaped like clouds reflect light and absorb sound over the younger children's area, which has an arts-and-crafts corner with a sink, counters and pint-sized tables for children. Nearby, oversized blue beanbag chairs offer cozy seating during storytime.

The bow of the schooner points to the third-floor balcony level, where the walls have been painted pale yellow to symbolize that the ship is sailing into the sun, while the stern faces the parenting alcove which



has been painted pale lavender to symbolize a sunset.

The local history section is located on the second floor under the balcony. Directly above is the Arts and Literature collection that provides one of the best views in town of Provincetown Harbor. A poet's alcove over to the side offers a place to work or hold small readings.

Even the elevator is in keeping with the nautical theme, with three layers of visible glass, including a panel of glass bricks creating the feeling that you are traveling underwater in a submarine.

It's easy to image the surroundings alone stirring the imagination and setting the creative spirit wild, which is just what a library is meant to do. And then there are all those books... ■

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The library is open year-round and offers programs for children and families. Visit www.ptownlib.com or call 508-487-7094 for hours and more information.