

Woodbridge Township Historic Preservation Commission

Woodbridge Township, New Jersey

Chartered 1669

Barron Library

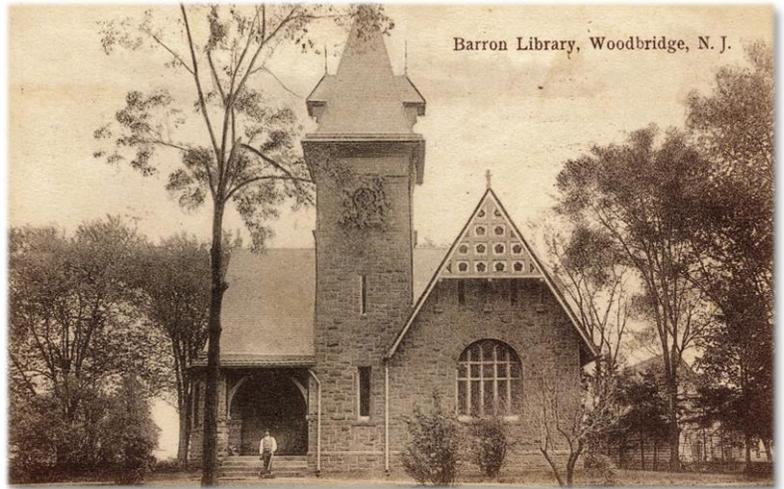
582 Rahway Avenue

Built: 1877

National Registry ID: 77000886

Perhaps one of the most distinctive buildings in town, the Barron Library was the gift of wealthy merchant and Woodbridge native, Thomas Barron. At his death, Barron bequeathed \$50,000 to establish a free public library, the first of its kind in Middlesex County. Built in the Romanesque Revival style, the library was designed by architect J. Cleveland Cady, famed for his work at Yale University, the Metropolitan Opera House, and the Brooklyn Academy of Design, among many. Among its fine features are its construction of Brown Belleville stone, distinct clock tower, stained glass windows, and imported delft tiles adorning the fireplace mantle, each depicting a scene from the Bible.

In 1977, the library's deed was granted to Woodbridge Township for use by the Cultural Arts Commission. Later that same year, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. At present, it houses the Barron Art Center, which hosts year-round exhibits and events for the public.

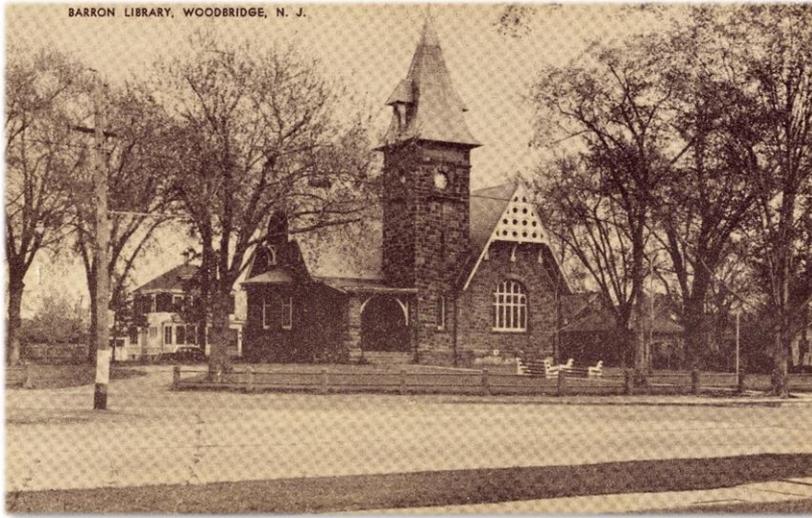


County Survey:

The Barron Library, Richardsonian Romanesque with earlier Victorian influences, is a 1 ½ story L-form rock-faced brownstone building with a high 3 story clock tower in the inside corner of the L. At the third level of the tower are two clocks on the facades open to view. This tower is capped by a steep hip roof which comes to a point at the peak. The roof of the library is steeply pitched with exposed rounded rafters at the eaves. The north gable end has exposed hammer-beam construction. Below on the first floor is a semi-circular projecting apse with 5 rectangular windows. The west and east facades have heavy timber lattice work in the gable ends; the west façade having pentagonal cut-out panels.



The Barron Library at the corner of Rahway Avenue and Port Reading Avenue as it looked on completion in 1877. Note unpaved road.



The windows and openings have, save the apse, round arches with heavy stone surrounds. The east façade has a stone chimney with a corbelled capstone. The south façade has a small rose window under the interrupting gable.

The Barron Library is currently functioning as one of the nine branch libraries of the Woodbridge Township Library System. It has been maintained in good condition over the past 100 years, and structurally is in excellent condition. However, certain areas of the building have fallen to minor disrepair since maintenance of the Library has been

haphazardly performed without major regard for the preservation of the original exterior design.

An early photograph of the Library indicates that the 18" thick brownstone walls were pale sepia and beige in color; the wood trim was painted in two light tones; the main roof was slate and matched the tower roof; finials were set at the ridge of gable ends; stained leaded glass dressed every window frame; and, two working clocks gave the tower its purpose.

The Library stands on 2,250 square feet of the original 31,000 square feet, described by the "Indenture" as a gift from John C. Barron (1837-1908), nephew of Thomas Barron, the first member of the Barron Library Board. The large front yard was planted with saplings after construction and defined by brownstone fence posts with iron rails which still exist.

A walkway from the front of the site leads to a roofed over porch from which the original arched pair of doors, although presently cut to a rectangular shape, are visible. The foyer within the stone walls of the tower is lined in brick and a decorative floral design of sculptured cut stone beige tiles. A beautifully designed stained glass window in a small rectangular vertical opening dominates the foyer. A round headed brick archway leads to a secondary foyer or hall which acts as the hub of the structure with all rooms radiating outwardly. Passing through the brick archway there is a staff room to the left, a reading room straight away, and a reference room to the right. The Reading Room is highlighted by a mock fireplace which is surrounded by 65 blue and white "Delft" tiles from Holland. Each depicts a scene from the Bible. An apse area at the north wall completes the interesting shaped room, and its windows help to catch available east and west daylight. The Reading Room has direct access to the Reference Room so that it may be closed off for quiet study. Because of its location on the south side on the south side of the building, the Reference Room is treated with a five foot diameter rose window high on the south wall. Four small round headed windows below it separate and illuminate the original bookshelves. At the ends of the space two huge arched windows share the burden for east and west daylight. The high angular vaulted ceiling is divided by four trusses which distribute the roof load to stone wall brackets. The space between the trusses is divided into a rectangular pattern of plastered coffers by oak beams which support the ceiling. Alterations, additions and repairs to the building, as best discerned from the Library records, are enumerated as follows:

1877 – Structure heated by coal furnace using through the floor registers to the main floor of the library. Springfield gas machine furnished fuel for gas lighting fixtures.



1900 – Steam heating system installed with radiators.

1903 – Electricity and electric light fixtures installed.

1912 – Water piped into building plumbing in staff room.

1938 – Stair installed from reference room to basement. Concrete floor poured in area under reference room.

1939 – Oil burning furnace and exterior underground oil tank installed. Rear vestibule to basement may have been constructed at this time.

1947 – New lighting fixtures installed.

1957 – Slate roof replaced with asphalt shingles. Basement finished for children's reading room.

1970 – Rest rooms installed in basement.

1974 – Ceiling in reference room repaired. New acoustic tile ceiling installed in reading room with wood cornice to match design of deteriorating plaster moulding.

The entire cost of the Library including structure, furniture, books, fence, fees, winter coal and grounds was \$19,112.59. The elaborate brick foyer was \$500, and was donated by John C. Barron. The basic structure was bid at \$13,600.

Statement of Significance:

The Barron Library was the first free public library in Middlesex County and one of the earliest such libraries in New Jersey.

Architecturally, this building, erected in 1877, is one of the first Richardsonian Romanesque edifices in the state.

Education:

The Barron Library was conceived by Thomas Barron (1790-1875). By his will of 1875, he bequeathed \$50,000 to provide for his gift to Woodbridge. The will read in part as follows: "...herein provided to the purchase of the ground in said Town of Woodbridge and to the erection of a suitable building thereon to be used as a Free Public Reading Room and Library for said town and to the supplying the same with books, magazines, and papers as may be proper and suitable..."

Thus, through the foresight of Thomas Barron and the dedication of the first five members of the Library Board, the first free public library in Middlesex County and approximately the fourth free public library in the State of New Jersey was formed. From its date of origin to 1967 the Library has been supported and maintained by the Woodbridge Township Library System.

The Barron Library, unfortunately, has served its 100th year as its last year as a public library. It will be turned over to the Township of Woodbridge for use as a reading room and cultural center. Since the reading room is being maintained the structure will house at least a partial use for which it was originally intended. The significance of maintaining public awareness of the 100 year old monument to the public library system in American is necessary so that our heritage and education system may be preserved.

Architecture:

The "Richardsonian Romanesque" structure belonging to the second phase of Romanesque Revival in America, was designed by J. Cleveland Cady, FAIA. The overall design is one of restraint in its purpose to blend a monumental stone building into a rural setting; and, although the wood trimmed gable ends and brackets are vestiges of the "Stick Style"

and rural Gothic styles, the blocks of brownstone, incised ornamental stone, and massive tower with copper studded roof peak and sculptured finials at the ends of the gable ridges, all speak loudly for Cady's attempt to begin designing in the new vogue of "Richardsonian Romanesque." The structure's significance in design should not be overlooked since Cady grew with the "Richardsonian" movement in parallel with Richardson, whose Trinity Church in Boston was not completed until 1877. Research indicates that the Barron Library probably was Cady's first design in "Richardsonian Romanesque" actually constructed.

J. Cleveland Cady (1837-1919) was a noted New York architect who had trained as a draftsman for numerous noted architectural firms including that of Town and Davis.

By 1870 Cady had established his own office in New York and subsequently designed numerous landmark public edifices for the region. His most recognized structures were the Metropolitan Opera House (1883), Jarvis Hall of Science, Trinity (1889), Brooklyn Academy of Design, American Museum of Natural History, Hudson Street Hospital (1891), South Presbyterian Church, Morristown, New Jersey, The Webb Memorial Chapel, Madison, New Jersey and the Barron Library in Middlesex County, New Jersey.

While most restrained and with evident vestiges of the Gothic Victorian influence the overall style of the Barron Library is Richardsonian Romanesque making the probably Cady's first building of this type and one of the first Richardsonian style edifices in New Jersey.

Finally and as a side note on community planning, the Library is within viewing distance of two very early church structures. The Trinity Episcopal Church, 1702, and the First Presbyterian Church, 1675. The land on which the Library stands is part of the original Barron estate, where the founder Thomas Barron was born on June 10, 1790.