

The FVGLA: Making of a Non-Profit Conglomerate

The Farmington Village Green and Library Association (FVGLA) has been in existence since 1901 as a nonprofit corporation. It manages the Village green, the libraries, the old Main Street cemetery, and Stanley-Whitman House museum. How did this motley collection come about?

It all started with Sarah Porter and D. Newton Barney. When Miss Porter died on February 17, 1900, in a codicil to her will she left two pieces of land to seven men—Julius Gay, Edward Deming, Adrian Wadsworth, Erastus Gay, Henry Cowles, Henry Mason, and Amasa Redfield—as trustees. The first condition of the bequest of land was “...to hold and maintain the same for the use of the people of said town as a public park, to be called the Village Green—the said premises having been purchased and laid out with funds generously contributed for that purpose by a number of my former pupils.” Miss Porter also left \$3,000 in trust, the income from which was to be used for the maintenance and improvement of the property. She also specified that the seven men should apply to the State Legislature for a charter for a tax-exempt corporation and that after incorporation the trustees should convey the real estate plus the trust fund to the corporation.

In April 1900, at the first meeting of the seven trustees, Mr. Redfield was elected secretary and was requested to secure legal opinion as to whether the erection of a library building on the property would be a violation of the terms of Miss Porter’s will. There is nothing in later records to indicate what the results were of that opinion. However, the more intriguing question is - why did the subject of a library come up? The answer is not specified, but it seems that D. Newton Barney had become involved. Thus, when the act of incorporation was presented and passed in the legislature in April 1901, there were now ten men named as incorporators—the original seven, plus Barney, Waldo Chase, and Alfred Pop—and the name of the corporation was the Farmington Village Green and Library Association, even though its sole responsibility at that point was the green. In this certificate of incorporation, the association was authorized to maintain the property left to the seven trustees by Sarah Porter and to erect a library building thereon for the purpose of maintaining a free public library for the inhabitants of the town. They were also allowed to purchase land adjoining the current property and use it for the same purposes. In August 1901, the original trustees accepted this charter and gave the land to the new corporation. The new 10-man group elected new officers with Barney as President. Thus the FVGLA was born. But who was this man who had interjected himself into the group and become their leader?

D. Newton Barney was born in Berlin in 1859, grew up in Hartford, graduated from Hartford Public High School, and was twenty years old and attending Yale when he moved to Farmington in 1879 with his widowed mother Sarah Brandegee Barney and aunt Julia Brandegee. His grandfather had been a banker and president of Wells Fargo Company. His father had operated a large store in Berlin plus a stage from Berlin to New York City, however, he died when D. Newton was only two years old.

After coming to Farmington, Barney’s mother was actively interested in village improvement and the library. In 1880 Barney, his mother, and aunt formed the Village Library Company, whose chief financial supporters were the three of them and Sarah Porter. Aunt Julia was the librarian of this Tunxis Library for eight years. After Barney finished Yale and Yale Law School, he became a successful lawyer and executive of Hartford Electric Light Company. In 1890, he married Laura Dunham of Hartford, a Miss Porter School graduate, whose father had founded HELCO. Soon after that, they moved to “the Norton

place," 11 Mountain Spring Road. Laura was also active in civic affairs and was said to have kept a fund for the needy constantly available, used especially for clothing for children. In the Barney Library, there is a portrait of D. Newton Barney, painted by his cousin Robert Brandegee.

For several years, the fledgling FVGLA managed only the Village green. A substantial gift from Miss Annie Jennings, a friend of Sarah Porter, was used for improvements to the park and a shelter for trolley passengers. The green had its first big event in October 1901, when President Theodore Roosevelt was in Farmington to visit his sister, Anna Roosevelt Cowles. The town officials asked him to participate in the planting of the McKinley Oak, but he declined, having refused all similar requests from other towns. However, during the ceremony, he rode up in a carriage and witnessed the ceremony on the "Sarah Porter Memorial Park." It seems that it took a few years before the official designation "Village Green" took hold.

In 1909 a special meeting of the FVGLA was called "to receive and consider Mr. D. Newton Barney's offer of a public library building." The proposition was that he would donate \$25,000 to build the library if the trustees of the association would within one year raise an equal amount as an endowment for its maintenance and support. The new building was to be named in memory of his mother, who had died in 1908. The trustees accepted the offer, but nothing became of it, apparently because they were not able to raise the maintenance funds.

Barney went ahead on his own, purchased some land behind the First (Congregational) Church, gave it to the church, then made a deal with the church's Prudential committee to lease some of the land, cleared the land of buildings, and applied to the state legislature for an amendment to the FVGLA's charter to broaden their territory to the entire town. At the May 1917 annual meeting, he spoke of bringing under the care of the FVGLA the present Village Library and "the building now under construction to house the same." In July, the trustees accepted the amendment to their charter, which also allowed them to take over the property of the Village Library Company.

The Sarah Brandegee Barney Memorial Library was brought into the FVGLA fold in November 1918, when the building was given to them by Barney "for the purposes of a free public library and for any other public purposes for which such building may properly be devoted...". Barney also gave the association 200 shares of U.S. Steel Co. preferred stock, then worth \$20,000, for the upkeep of the library. The organization was now truly the Village Green and Library Association. Nine new trustees, the first Library Committee, were added: Julia Brandegee, Mary Redfield, Lillian Root, Mrs. Laura Barney, Stephen Lawrence, Whitney Palache, L.C. Root, Robert Keep, and Florence Gay. In 1920, Mr. Palache established the Palache Fund, for books to promote the study of history. The fund was in memory of his son James, who had been killed in World War I.

The third unit joined the fold in 1928, when the town of Farmington deeded "The Old Farmington Cemetery" to the Association, upon condition that if the FVGLA ever ceases to exist, then title reverts to the town. This cemetery on Main Street, sometimes referred to as "Memento Mori" cemetery, has over 850 graves, which are documented in a massive map and list published in 1935.

In the 1930s, two important events occurred. The leased land under the library, plus an additional three acres behind it, was acquired by the FVGLA from the church. The rear land was then leased to the Center School District (now Noah Wallace School) for a public playground. The second event was the

gift to the FVGLA of “the old Whitman House” by D. Newton Barney’s son, Austin Dunham Barney, in September 1935. The elder Barney also gave \$35,000 as a trust fund for the maintenance of the house as a museum. In 1941 the boundaries of the land around the house were enlarged to their present size. Thus the FVGLA acquired its fourth major property, whose name has changed over the years from “the old Whitman House” to the Farmington Museum to its current name, “The Stanley-Whitman House.” It is interesting to note that 1935 was the year of the Connecticut tercentenary, and during that year, there was a major exhibit of items related to the history of Farmington, held in the Barney Library. Many of those items later became the core of Stanley-Whitman’s collection.

In 1946, just after the war, when the town was changing from its governance by selectmen and boroughs, plus separate boards for each school, to its current Town Council/Town Manager system, the library found that it could no longer meet its financial needs solely with income from the endowment. So it formed the Public Relations Committee, to do publicity and raise funds. Its chairwoman was Lydia Hewes, with Sally Smith as secretary. Their first appeal letter went to voters in the 1st District and they collected \$1,545 from 119 families. The first public program sponsored by the committee was a slide lecture by Mabel Hurlburt entitled “Old Farmington Houses,” her collection is now in the Farmington Room of the library. Over the past 60 years, this support committee and its larger membership have become the “Friends of the Farmington Library,” is now an official arm of the FVGLA, and raises over \$30,000 annually for programs and equipment for the two libraries.

The final major change in the FVGLA was the 1959 merger with the West End Library Association, which had operated a library in Unionville since 1902. This brought into being the two-building system that still exists, although at that time the Barney Library was the main one and the branch was in the old Carnegie building on School Street in Unionville. The branch later moved into the brick building behind the Carnegie building, formerly the Methodist Sunday School, and operated there until 1983 when the new main library construction was complete and it opened on 6 Monteith Drive.

For a hundred years, the Barney family was closely associated with the FVGLA. D. Newton Barney served as president of the association from 1901 until his death in 1936. He was followed by his son Austin Dunham Barney, from 1936 to 1968. Mrs. A.D. (Katy) Barney, Dunham Barney’s wife, was instrumental in the development of Stanley-Whitman House. Dunham and Katy’s daughter, Harriet Lidgerwood, was vice president of the association for many years and was an active supporter of all FVGLA’s operations. In 1981-82, she provided major funds for the construction of the current main library. Dunham’s sister, Sarah Barney Lefferts, provided a major bequest to the FVGLA that more than doubled the Stanley-Whitman House endowment in the 1980s. Each was a sterling example of service to the community and philanthropy at its best.

Thus the FVGLA has evolved from seven trustees to the current forty. It has grown from one Village green to four major responsibilities, seen its total endowments grow to over \$4 million, and served the residents of the town of Farmington for more than a century—a successful nonprofit conglomerate.