

# Architectural Tour

Text by Jane Peterson Bouley, 2009

James Blackstone was born in Branford in 1793 and spent his entire life in his native town. He was a farmer, town selectman, state senator and captain of the Connecticut militia. In 1814 he married Sarah Beach of Branford and they had six children. James Blackstone died in 1886 at the age of 92 at his home on Pine Orchard Road.

Timothy Beach Blackstone, the youngest child of James and Sarah, was born in 1829. He began his career with the railroad at the age of eighteen, eventually becoming president of the Chicago and Alton Railroad. Mr. Blackstone funded the entire construction of a new library in Branford in memory of his father James Blackstone. The library cost \$300,000 to build and an additional endowment was left by the donor. Timothy Beach Blackstone died on May 26, 1900 in Chicago, Illinois.



Work on the new library in Branford began in 1893 under the direction of Solon Spencer Beman (1853-1914). Beman was a noted architect in Chicago designing many prominent buildings in that city. The library is designed in the Neoclassical Revival style with details taken from the beautiful Erechtheum of the Athenian Acropolis. The exterior, including the dome, is made entirely of Tennessee white marble. The central portion of the building is two stories high, dominated by a graceful, low dome. Atop the dome is an elaborate copper crest. Along the entire roof edge are acanthus leaf finials. The library took nearly three years to complete and was dedicated on June 17, 1896.

The library façade is dominated by four beautiful fluted Ionic columns of marble, twenty feet high. The columns support a large frieze and classical Greek attic story pediment. Above the windows on each side of the entrance are smaller versions of the Greek pediment with a scroll on each side. In back of the columns and extending its full length is an open loggia with a granite floor and paneled granite ceiling. The loggia is reached by a broad flight of thirteen marble steps, thirty-nine feet wide. On each side



of the stairs is a pair of large cheek blocks.

At the entry to the library are a pair of beautiful bronze doors, each panel measuring 35 by 106 inches and weighing nearly 2,000 pounds. They were designed by William Fitzroy Smith in a harmonious yet somewhat whimsical style. Central to the theme are two lion's paws resting on mother earth and at the top is a small ram's head. An owl symbolizes human wisdom. The center forms a torch which is framed with medallions and cords. Behind the bronze doors is a spacious marble vestibule leading to a set of oak doors, of the same dimension. All the doors and frames throughout the library are trimmed in marble or wood with carved rosettes.



Passing through the bronze doors, vestibule and wooden doors, is the rotunda, the central feature of the building.



The rotunda is octagonal in form and the various other rooms radiate from it. The rotunda is 44 feet in diameter and is paved with marble, mosaic floor tiles, designed in Paris for the library.

The mosaic floor is laid in curving floral patterns covering 12,500 square feet of floor space.



The walls, piers, arches and entablature of the rotunda are entirely of polished gray and pink marble from Tennessee. Resting on eight pink marble columns is the dome of Italian Renaissance architecture which rises 50 feet above the rotunda.

To the right of the rotunda is the reading room which is 38 feet wide by 40 feet long with a semi-circular bay at the far end. The mosaic floor continues into this space. The entrance to the room is framed by two Ionic mazzetto marble columns with gold gilt capitals and the center is flanked by two additional pairs of columns. The lower portion of the walls and window frames are oak. The room retains its original bronze light fixtures which number 300 throughout the building. Along the ceiling edge and throughout the building is "egg and dart" molding.



At the east end of the reading room is a handsomely carved oak fireplace. Above it hangs a large oil portrait in a gilt frame of the Honorable James Blackstone to whom the library is dedicated. The portrait was painted in 1903 by the artist J. Colin Forbes of Toronto, Canada and has always hung at this location.



To the left of the rotunda is the reference room, originally called the stack or book room. This room is identical in form, architecture, and dimension to the reading room. The iron book stacks are in the circular portion of the room, radiating from a common center. The mosaic floors continue throughout this space. A second story mezzanine is used as a study room.

Of note in the reference room is an original book elevator, James Blackstone's wooden desk, and a Seth Thomas gallery clock from the 1920s. The metal work throughout the building was constructed by Bradley & Hubbard Manufacturing Company of Meriden.



The Lucy Hammer room was dedicated to her in 1995 in honor of the many contributions to the library by the Hammer family. This room was originally used as the librarian or director's room. Over the marble fireplace

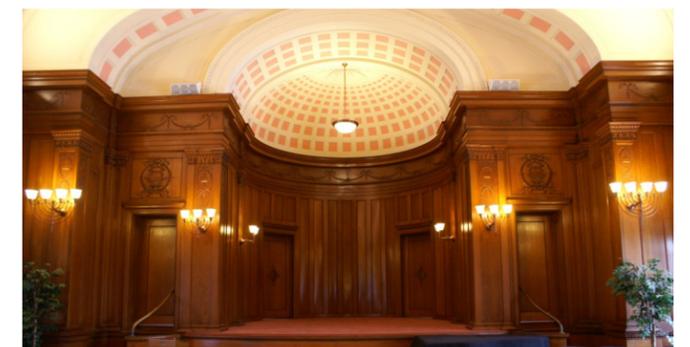
hangs a large oil painting in a gilt frame of Timothy B. Blackstone, the library's donor, also painted by J. Colin Forbes. A collection of local projectile points (arrowheads) are framed on the wall.



Walking straight through the rotunda is the stair hallway in front of the auditorium. Opening from the hall are marble stairs with a bronze and mahogany balustrade which gracefully turn toward the basement level. They are designed to be self-supporting on the arch principle. The walls and ceilings of the stairway and hallway are entirely of polished marble. Ahead are large oak doors, carved with rosettes, being the same dimension as the front bronze doors.



Through the oak doors is the auditorium, originally called the lecture room, which is finished in antique white oak, richly paneled and carved to a height of 16 feet all around the room. Just beyond the entrance is a carved, oak paneled ceiling which is supported by two oak columns. The wooden stage is set in a circular niche with an arched ceiling, with retiring rooms on each side. The lecture room is 50 feet long by 40 feet wide, and is well lit by twelve large windows on the side walls. The auditorium is noted for its fine acoustics. Many original bronze light fixtures, graceful in design, can be seen in the auditorium.



The second floor is reached by the marble staircase already referred to. An octagonal corridor surrounds and overlooks the rotunda below. The center of the corridor is protected by marble balustrade and is surrounded by eight marble arches which support the dome. Between the supporting columns and the arches is a carved Greek entablature, a theme repeated throughout the building. The dome is 50 feet high with an ornamental skylight forming its eye which lights the space. The design of the dome's metal crest can be seen through the skylight.



The dome is embellished with large paintings, illustrating the evolution of bookmaking. The panels, which are each 6 by 9 feet, are framed in the richly ornamented and gilded ribs of the dome. The gilt frames or ribs narrow toward the top of the dome and have a wheat and egg and dart design. The paintings are by the well known artist Oliver Dennet Grover (1860-1927), considered the dean of Chicago painters.

The titles of the paintings are:

- Gathering the Papyrus
- Records of the Pharaohs
- Stories from the Iliad
- Medieval Illumination
- Venetian Copper-plate Printing
- First Proof of the Gutenberg Bible
- Franklin Press
- A Book Bindery 1895

Between the arches in the center of the second floor corridor are eight medallion portraits of New England authors placed in marble spandrels. Mr. Grover also painted these portraits. Clockwise, the authors are:



- Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896)
- James Russell Lowell (1819-1891)
- Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-1894)
- John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892)
- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882)
- Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864)
- Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)
- William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878)

As you return to the rotunda on the main level, observe with special attention the beauty of the marble, floors, dome, rotunda, and artistic panels. The James Blackstone Memorial Library was renovated in 1995 and many original elements of the building, such as the floor, walls and light fixtures, were cleaned and restored. More recently, the exterior of the building was cleaned and repainted.

After the death of Timothy Blackstone, his wife Isabella Norton Blackstone donated to the city of Chicago a library in Timothy's memory. The Blackstone Public Library in Chicago, also designed by Solon Spencer Beman and built in 1904, is a smaller and less elaborate replica of the library in Branford. It became the first branch of the Chicago Public Library system and is now called the Blackstone Branch Library.

On the lower level of Branford's library is a bust of Timothy Blackstone on an onyx base, sculpted by Oliver Dennett Grover in 1902. This sculpture was donated by William Blackstone of Norwich, a nephew of Timothy Blackstone. Several other paintings, of local scenes and by local artists, can be seen throughout the library. The architecture of the east and west sides, and the rear of the building's exterior are also to be enjoyed.

## Library Hours

Monday–Thursday 9am–8pm  
 Friday & Saturday 9am–5pm  
 Sundays 1pm–4pm (September–May)

# JAMES BLACKSTONE MEMORIAL LIBRARY



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