History

On November 2nd, 1922, those attending a meeting of the Board of trustees of Wilson College were astounded when board secretary G.H. Bartle announced a gift of $75,000 to the college from longtime trustee George H. Stewart to erect a building on campus in memory of his brother John. Bartle’s simple announcement was:

“I have the honor and pleasure of tendering Wilson College a gift of $75,000 is cash from Mr. George H. Stewart, the eldest trustee of this institution, for the erection of a building of natural limestone on the campus as a memorial to his distinguished brother the late Justice Stewart; to be known as the John Stewart Hall. I would be glad if Dr. Laird would accept this gift on behalf of the Trustees and Dr. Warfield would announce it to the College at chapel.”

This gift, the largest in the history of the college at that time, began the process that led to the building of the John Stewart Memorial Library. At a meeting of the board on December 6, 1922 it was decided the building to be erected would be a library and stand on the campus between Fletcher and Science Halls. The Philadelphia architectural firm of Furness Evans and Company would be employed to submit plans as soon as possible. Eventually George Stewart gave a total of $102,000 to complete the structure, and his giving was the sole source of funding for the structure.

Justice John Stewart, for whom the building is named, was recognized as the first citizen of Chambersburg. A graduate of Princeton in the study of law at the age of 17, he practiced in Chambersburg and Shippensburg until the Civil War. He volunteered, was made a captain and wounded at Antietam. He was chief Burgess of Chambersburg at the time the town was burned by the confederates. He served on the court of common pleas, was appointed and then elected a Justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, and would have served as Chief Justice in 1921, but was tragically struck down by a trolley car and killed in front of his home on Thanksgiving Day 1920.

Both John Stewart and his brother George were long-standing trustees and friends of Wilson, serving for decades. At the time of the gift, George was likely the most well-known man in the Cumberland Valley. The need for new classrooms on campus had recently been alleviated by the construction of the Lortz Hall on campus, so the library was a natural improvement. The cornerstone was laid on October 15, 1923 as part of Founder’s Day, it was completed on Nov, 6, 1924 and was dedicated May 9th, 1925, with George Stewart presenting the keys to the building to Mass Hannah Patterson, representing the trustees of the college.

The building served the college well as the collections grew. In 1954 the college retained Charles B. Shaw, librarian of Swarthmore College, to make a thorough study of the Stewart Library and its use. By this time the capacity of the library was being reached, the collection having grown to 44,000 volumes. Shaw suggested adding stacks throughout the building, but noted overcrowding was making the space unworkable for students. That growth continued and by 1961 the collections had reached 72,000 volumes - far exceeding the original 42,000 volume capacity of the building, necessitating the construction of an addition. The addition was completed in 1962 at a cost of $322,000. Funding came from many sources, and notably the first gift was one of $15,000 from the actor Jimmy Stewart in honor of his mother Elizabeth Jackson Stewart, class of 1894. Mr. Stewart is no relation to Justice John Stewart for whom the library is named. U.S. Steel and the W.K. Kellogg Foundations were also notable contributors.

The addition added over 70 study carrels, new microfilm and microcard facilities and materials, a listening library as well as the needed stacks and study areas. While the main building represents a time when libraries where gothic cathedrals, the addition represented the efficiency and economy of the 60’s - and while efforts were made to blend the two, the differences are clear.

Wilson has not improved the physical facilities of the library since this last addition in 1962, and the library world has moved on again into the electronic age. E-books and databases are replacing stacked volumes, and students’ access to information and research are altogether different than decades ago. Once again new facilities are needed to meet the needs of Wilson’s students.