1875 On July 10, Santa Monica officially became a town. Within a year, Santa Monica had 1,000 residents, 900 houses, 75 tents, a school district, a church, the wharf, a bathhouse, a hotel, and the Santa Monica Outlook was launched.

1876 The first Library Association was formed. $2.00 annual dues were used to purchase books. Weekly meetings were held to discuss books and read papers. The community slowly continued to grow, and the Library Association started to look for a location to be used as a reading room.

1884 A room adjoining Dr. Fred C. McKinnie’s drug store was established as the reading room.

1888 The reading room was turned over to the newly formed Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) on Third Street. At this time, the collection of books numbered 400, plus popular magazines and newspapers. In July, the Evening Outlook described the reading room as one of the “specially inviting places in Santa Monica.”

COVER PHOTOGRAPHS

To left: Main Library at 1343 Sixth St. (2003/CYNNIMURPHY)

Top right: Clouds above the Main Library at 601 Santa Monica Blvd. (2011/CYNNIMURPHY)

Bottom left: Santa Monica Public Library built with Carnegie funds at 533 Santa Monica Blvd. (1912)

Bottom right: Carl Cheng’s “Underwater Canopy” sculpture in the Main Library courtyard at 601 Santa Monica Blvd. (2005/CYNNIMURPHY)
1903-04 In March 1903, the library moved to the new City Hall located at Fourth Street and Oregon Avenue (later Santa Monica Boulevard) which provided more room. However, this was not meant to be a permanent location.

As the city grew, so did the library’s collection; and the public wanted a library building of its own. Early in 1903, Mrs. J.H. Clark wrote to Andrew Carnegie making a plea for a library building in Santa Monica. Carnegie’s reply in April 1903 stated in part: “… Mr. Carnegie will be pleased to furnish Twelve Thousand Five Hundred Dollars to erect a Free Public Library Building for Santa Monica.”

Within a short time, the citizens raised $1982.50 and purchased a lot on the northeast corner of Oregon Avenue and Fifth Street. Work began on the building in January 1904. The library opened to the public eight months later, on August 11.
1910s

The need for branch libraries was also evident. As early as 1906, there was a book exchange located in the Clop Brothers Drug Store on Pier Avenue for borrowers to return books and request new ones.

Eventually, a lot on the northeast corner of Ocean Park Boulevard and Main Street was purchased for $8,000 to build a branch library in the Ocean Park neighborhood. The mayor wrote to the Carnegie Corporation requesting a grant to help with construction costs. Carnegie granted $12,500.

Designed by Frank Kegley, Ocean Park Branch Library opened to the public on February 15, 1918.

1920s-30s

In 1926, a bond issue was passed in the sum of $50,000 for the reconstruction and expansion of the Main library located at Santa Monica Boulevard and Fifth Street. The small Carnegie-funded structure was enlarged and remodeled into a Spanish-style design by E. J. Baume, with two additional wings.

This new Main library opened to the public on November 18, 1927.

By 1930, Santa Monica had a population of 37,000. It had a hospital, junior college, and was home to the new Douglas Aircraft Company and Clover Airfield.

On July 1, 1931, the Fairview Heights Branch library opened. Located at 1903 20th Street, it was a 15-foot wide storefront, sandwiched between a grocery store and barber shop.
1930s One of the most unique features of the remodeled Main Library was the murals created by artist Stanton Macdonald-Wright (1890-1973). Commissioned by the Public Works Administration Project, the extensive mural cycle depicted the history of humankind. Macdonald-Wright began work on the mural in February 1934. It would take him 18 months to complete the project. Unveiled in 1935, the 2,000-square-foot composition made a lasting impression on visitors to the library.

Top: Stanton Macdonald-Wright with Barbara Douglas, daughter of Donald Douglas, at the installation and unveiling of his murals on August 25, 1935 (see bottom left).
Bottom: Stanton Macdonald-Wright murals in the reference area, 1935.

The Stanton Macdonald-Wright mural series was on view in the Main Library for three decades before it was dismantled when the library moved to a new location in 1965. Because it had been created as part of the New Deal art projects, the mural was transferred to the federal government. Most of the series remained in storage for many years near Washington, D.C. In 2005, selected panels of the mural were returned on loan from the Smithsonian American Art Museum to be conserved and reinstalled in the new Main Library when it opened in January 2006.

Top left: Roger Bacon with assistant Copernicus (left panel) and Galileo (right panel).
Bottom left: Group of musicians: Samuel Lifschey on viola, Norris Tivin on double-bass, George Barrere on flute, Ugo Savolini on bassoon, Van der Elst on trombone, Carl Heinrich on trumpet, Josef Franzl on French horn, Karl Mack of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and director Frank Tuttle.

The Stanton Macdonald-Wright murals
Children’s book illustrator Eulalie Banks Wilson painted the murals for the Boys and Girls Room in the Main Library. Peter Pan, Cinderella, and other characters from children’s books graced the walls of the children’s section for more than two decades. The murals were demolished when the building was razed in 1974.

By 1942, it was clear the storefront Fairview Branch Library could no longer adequately handle increased patronage, and the Library began to look for a more suitable location. On July 13, 1942, Fairview Branch Library opened its second location at 2030 Pico Boulevard. During World War II, longtime Fairview Branch librarian Nellie Sullivan initiated a service she had read about: preschool story times. It was the first of its kind on the West Coast.

Also during the war in 1945, the basement of the Ocean Park Branch Library was converted to a Young People’s Room where teenagers gathered to study and play games. In subsequent years, this room housed children’s books and then was used for meetings and programs.
In 1947, Santa Monica Public Library became the first public library in California to have a Film Department. It began with three 16mm films and some projection equipment. By 1949, the department had expanded to include recordings.

By the 1950s, the north side of Santa Monica was in need of library services, and the Montana Avenue Branch, located in a rented building at 1528-30 Montana Avenue, opened in February 1952. The newest branch thrived, and within six years, the circulation climbed to over 80,000 items. The branch library had outgrown its rented space and plans were underway for a new building. Two lots on Montana Avenue were purchased. On August 20, 1959, groundbreaking ceremonies were conducted at 1704 Montana Avenue. On March 1, 1960, the new Montana Avenue Branch Library opened to the public.
Plans were also underway for a larger building for the Fairview Branch, which, since the opening at its second location on Pico Boulevard in 1942, had grown tremendously. In 1956, the third Fairview Branch Library at 2101 Ocean Park Boulevard opened to the public.

In 1962, a bond issue was passed and land purchased on the corner of Sixth Street and Santa Monica Boulevard for the building of a new Main Library. Construction began in February 1964. Designed by architects Matthew Robert Leizer and Thomas J. Russell, the new Main Library at 1343 Sixth Street opened to the public in September 1965.
1980s. In the early 1980s, asbestos was discovered in the composition of the Main Library's ceiling. In August 1986, the building was closed for asbestos abatement. The building reopened in March 1988 with minor changes in layout. The Ocean Park Branch Library also closed in June 1984 for a renovation that respected the look of the beloved Carnegie building. When it reopened in September 1985, it had a new entrance, a children's area, and a community room. The community showed its support by increasing usage 40%.

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Main Library at 1343 Sixth Street

The Ocean Park Branch Library also closed in June 1984 for a renovation that respected the look of the beloved Carnegie building. When it reopened in September 1985, it had a new entrance, a children's area, and a community room. The community showed its support by increasing usage 40%.
1990s: In 1996, a formal planning process began for the expansion of the Main Library, including community focus groups, surveys, and meetings. The result was the development of a Library Master Plan, and Moore Ruble Yudell (MRY) Architects & Planners of Santa Monica was chosen to formulate the conceptual design. In 1998, a bond was passed by 81% to fund library improvements. In 1999, the Main Library underwent a remodel, designed by Architects Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer.

In 2002, after extensive community input, the Santa Monica City Council approved MRY’s design. Razing of the old library building, construction of the three-level subterranean parking garage, and construction of the two-story Main Library began in spring 2003.

From 2001 to 2002, Montana Branch Library underwent improvement renovations, designed by Architects Killefer Flammang. While the Main Library was under construction, the core of the library’s adult collections was housed in a temporary location at 1324 Fifth Street. The “Temp Main” served the public from May 12, 2003 to December 4, 2005. The Main Library’s children’s and youth collections were housed in the lower level of the Ocean Park Branch Library during this time.
The new Main Library, a 104,000-square-foot facility honored with a Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED) award, opened to the public in January 2006. It features a large array of public computer facilities and expanded meeting facilities, including the Martin Luther King, Jr. Auditorium. Visitors can also enjoy the beautifully landscaped outdoor cafe.

The Building of the New Main Library 601 Santa Monica Boulevard
1931 On July 1, the Fairview Heights Branch Library opened. Located at 1903 20th Street, it was a 15-foot wide storefront branch between a grocery store and barber shop.

1942 On July 13, Fairview Branch Library opened its second location at 2030 Pico Boulevard.

1952 In February, the Montana Avenue Branch Library, located in a rented building at 1528-30 Montana Avenue, opened.

1956 The third Fairview Branch Library at 2101 Ocean Park Boulevard opened to the public.

1960 On March 1, the second Montana Avenue Branch Library at 1704 Montana Avenue opened.

1962 A bond issue was passed and land was purchased on the corner of Sixth Street and Santa Monica Boulevard for the building of a new Main Library.

1965 The new Main Library, located at 1403 Sixth Street, opened to the public in September.

1977 In May, the Ocean Park Branch Library, an original Carnegie building, was declared an official city landmark.

1978 The Fairview Branch Library expanded to include a new community room and an alcove area.

1979 Staff began to remove historic photographs found in an album and preserved them on microfiche, forming the foundation for the Library’s Image Archives.

1985 In September, the Ocean Park Branch Library reopened following a 15-month renovation that included a new entrance, a children’s area, and a community room.

1986 In August, the Main Library closed for asbestos abatement.

1988 In March, the Main Library reopened with minor changes in layout. Automated circulation and catalog systems were implemented.
Chronology

1989 Staff began answering questions via electronic mail as part of the City’s Innovative Public Electronic Network.

1994 On January 17, the Northridge earthquake heavily damaged the Main Library and Fairview Branch Library. Both locations closed for weeks for repairs.

1995 A proposal to digitize the photographs and slides in the Image Archives collection was approved.

1996 A formal planning process began for the expansion of the Main Library. The result was a Library Master Plan, and Moore Ruble Yudell (MRY) Architects & Planners of Santa Monica was chosen to formulate the conceptual design.

1998 A bond was passed by 81% to fund library improvements.

2000 Santa Monica Public Library became the first public library to offer Internet-based chat reference services as the pilot site of the 24/7 Reference Project.

2007 In collaboration with the City’s Environmental Programs Division, the Library presented its first Green Prize for Sustainable Literature. The winner was Al Gore’s An Inconvenient Truth.

2009 The City Council approved construction of a new branch library in Virginia Avenue Park and selected Koning Eizenberg Architects (KEA) as part of a competitive process.

2010 The Library began lending eBooks.

2012 On August 15, the ground breaking ceremony for the Pico Branch Library in Virginia Avenue Park took place.

2014 The Pico Branch Library had its “soft” opening on April 24, and the ribbon-cutting, grand opening ceremony took place on June 28.

2015 In July, the Fairview Branch Library closed temporarily for major improvements and upgrades.

Locations of Main and Branch Libraries

Main Library

1884-1888 McKinley’s Drug Store | Third Street
1888-1890 WCTU Building | Third Street
1890-1903 Bank of Santa Monica | Third Street & Oregon Avenue (Santa Monica Blvd.)
1903-1904 City Hall | Fourth Street & Oregon Avenue (Santa Monica Blvd.)
1904-1927 Carnegie Building | 503 Santa Monica Boulevard
1927-1965 Enlarged Carnegie Building | 503 Santa Monica Boulevard
1965-2003 1343 Sixth Street
2003-2006 Temporary location | 1324 Fifth Street
2006-present 601 Santa Monica Boulevard

Ocean Park Branch Library

1918-present Carnegie building | 2601 Main Street (Main St. & Ocean Park Blvd.)

Fairview Branch Library

1931-1942 Storefront | 30th Street & Delaware
1942-1956 Rented building | 20th Street & Pico Boulevard
2003-present 1324 Fifth Street

Montana Branch Library

1952-1963 Storefront | 15th Street & Montana Avenue
1960-present 1704 Montana Avenue

Pico Branch Library

2014-present Virginia Avenue Park Campus | 2201 Pico Boulevard
City Librarians

1890-1939 Elfie A. Mosse
1939-1951 Katherine Whelan
1951-1952 Harold Helmrich
1952-1972 Hilda Glaser
1972-1974 Patricia Terrill Brownell
1974-1989 Carol Aronoff
1990-2004 Winona Allard
2004-2013 Greg Mullen
2014- Maria Tamil Hudson Carpenter

Most information here is extracted from The Santa Monica Public Library: 1890-1990 by Ellen Brazy and Janet Hunt.

Unless otherwise noted, the images are from the Library's Imagine Santa Monica digital collections (digital.smpl.org).

SANTA MONICA PUB L I B R A R Y

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