

## **Albert Fearing's Dream**

*A talk given by Hingham Public Library Board of Trustees President David J. Mehegan on September 30, 2012 commemorating the 140<sup>th</sup> year of the incorporation of the Hingham Public Library.*

It's good to see you all here today. We wanted this weekend's activities to combine the community's appreciation and support of the Library, with the Library's reciprocal appreciation of all of you, some of our thousands of patrons and friends in the town, who provide much of the energy and vitality that we see here every day and night. So let me say at the start — many, many thanks.

I'm going to tell you a brief history story.

I am quite sure that if Albert Fearing, our founder and first funder, could come back and look at today's Library, he would be baffled and amazed at the sight. What an odd-looking wide low building, so brightly lighted and with so many windows. He would surely scratch his head at the sight of the parking lot. Inside, he would wonder, what *are* those black squares mounted on the tables that people are staring at so intently? And those little thin flat squares, apparently made of glass, that people are poring **over** and picking up on the second floor? What are all these people waiting

for, lined up on what we call Independent Movie Night? He would be surprised at the art galleries and the guitar recitals.

However, he would not be surprised at the rows of stacks full of books, and the people reading them at tables or in comfortable chairs, and lined up at the desk to check them out and carry them away. There would be no doubt in his mind — this is the Library. He would be pleased to see the citizens of all ages of his native town still enjoying and benefiting from his brilliant idea.

Those of you who remember when the staff entrance on Leavitt Street was the main entrance know that there is a bronze plaque to the left of the door, honoring the memory of Albert Fearing. It calls him: “A gentleman of virtue who loved his native town.” Aside from that plaque — which I wish we could move closer to the new entrance — there are few visible reminders of this remarkable man.

Albert Fearing, born in 1798, was an early model of an American type which we recognize more readily from later history: that is, a man who makes a fortune, then spends the rest of his life using it to give good things back to his community. Probably the first of that type was Benjamin Franklin, who made his fortune as a printer by the time he was in his forties,

and then gave over the rest of his life to public service. One of the interesting things about Franklin was that he always refused to patent his inventions — the Franklin stove, bifocal glasses, the lightning rod. He didn't care about money — he had all that he needed. He viewed his discoveries as free contributions to the betterment of mankind and his country.

George Peabody, a banker and financier born in South Danvers, Mass. (later renamed Peabody), was another like Franklin. He is known as the father of American philanthropy, even though he spent most of his life in England. He was the model for later millionaires and foundation-makers, such as John D. Rockefeller Jr., Edsel Ford, Andrew Carnegie, and Bill Gates. George Peabody — Albert Fearing's almost exact contemporary — gave away \$8 million in his lifetime in both the United States and England, for education here and for housing for the poor over there — an astonishing amount in his day.

In 1869, George Peabody endowed public libraries in Vermont and Massachusetts. But he was not the only wealthy man to have this idea. Albert Fearing of Hingham did the same thing at the same time — long before Andrew Carnegie began, in the 1880s, his celebrated program to

endow free public libraries. What Fearing did was of course on a much smaller scale than that of Carnegie, but the idea was the same, and it is because of him and his idea that we are all here today.

He was born in Hingham, one of nine children, from a long family line in the town. His father, Hawkes Fearing — the third but not the last by that name — was owner of the hugely successful Hingham Cordage Company, located where the Hingham Town Hall and the fields behind it are today. It's hard for us to appreciate how important and profitable cordage was — that is, rope and cable — in the days of sailing ships.

Hawkes Fearing's son, Albert, educated in Hingham, went into the maritime business, and made a fortune as a ship-chandler in the Port of Boston — that is, the selling all manner of ship supplies and fittings. By the 1850s, like Franklin before him, he had made as much money as he needed. So he sold his business, came home to Hingham and became a gentleman farmer and benefactor. His house later became St. Paul's Church rectory, and his land extended north over the hill where Miles Road and Burditt Avenue are today, all the way to Broad Cove. Hence the name Fearing Road.

Fearing had many humane interests. Like many New England Unitarians, he was strongly anti-slavery, although well before the Civil War

he believed the solution was not simply emancipation, but African colonization. He was a state delegate to the American Colonization Society. Colonization was controversial even in its day, but there's no doubt that Fearing meant well. He even bought twenty slaves in Tennessee, freed them, and helped finance their emigration to Liberia. Locally, he supported the Boston Seaman's Aid Society, the Children's Mission, and the Home for Aged Men. He was the cofounder of the Hingham Agricultural and Horticultural Society — its building once was located on the current Library's site — dedicated to experimentation and education in scientific principles of farming.

In the late eighteenth century, Albert Fearing had his great idea — a library, a *public* library. There were many so-called social libraries at that time. There still are some **in existence**, like the Boston Athenaeum and the Massachusetts Historical Society, owned by their members with restrictive rules for nonmembers. There were three social libraries in Hingham in the nineteenth century, the first one founded in 1771. Although they were private, they did see themselves as furthering the public good, and were more or less available to the public at the discretion of the proprietors. But a fully public library? The Boston Public Library — whose building bears

the motto “Free to All” — had been founded in 1848, but that was by act of the Legislature. But how could a small town do the same?

In 1868, Albert Fearing just did it. He bought two small parcels of land on Main Street in Hingham Center, where the war memorial triangle is now at the corner of Middle Street. He hired a Boston architect and a Hingham builder and put up a two-story building. He set up a governing structure with fifteen trustees, and conveyed the building to them along with a contribution of \$5,000 as an income-producing endowment — and an \$8,400 insurance policy. He appointed the first librarian, one Henry Siders, and paid his salary through 1870. His total costs for all this were more than \$20,000. The social libraries — two at the beginning and one in 1891 — turned over their collections to the public library. At the dedication, July 5, 1869, Fearing said that the building, already furnished with 4,000 books, was “to be devoted to the use of a Public Library *free to all persons.*” It was not to be a restricted club for the elite.

Albert Fearing was foresighted in many ways — for example, it was he who asked the Trustees “to permit, as an act of courtesy and good neighborhood, the inhabitants of the adjoining towns of Hull, Cohasset, Scituate, South Scituate [now Norwell], Abington and Weymouth to visit the

Library for purposes of reference, reading, study, and consultation of the books therein.” This was the beginning of regionalization, long before the establishment of the Massachusetts Library System and the Old Colony Library Network that we know today.

In 1872, the Trustees applied to the Legislature for an act of incorporation, which was passed and signed by the governor — and it is from that year that we date the beginning of the Library as we know it today, 140 years ago. This too was at Albert Fearing’s suggestion, though not insistence, as a way to protect and perpetuate the Library and prevent interference with the Trustees’ independence. Before the act of the Legislature, although the Library was meant to be for the public it was still in practice private in its dependence on the founder and the governing system he created. But he did not cling to power over it; he wanted the Library to stand on its own when he was not there to support it. Only three years later, in 1875, he was dead.

In January of 1879, the Library, along with most of its books, burned to the ground, but thanks to the prudence of the founder, the entire cost of rebuilding was covered by insurance, and the new, grander edifice opened

on the same site only a little more than a year later. That building remained in use until the new combined library and town hall opened in 1966.

Albert Fearing never lost interest in his baby — he had no human children. He continued to make gifts of books and money to the Library for the rest of his life. By the time he died, he had given more than \$40,000. You could ask, “Is that a lot?” It might buy an average SUV today. Not wishing to make a guess, I consulted an inflation calculator. In 2010, 40,000 1875 dollars would equal roughly \$784,000. If there is any citizen out there today who would like to make that kind of contribution to the Library, we should be most grateful, but my hunch is that Albert Fearing will continue to hold the record for generosity to the public Library in his native town.

As you can well imagine, the town fathers were most grateful to Albert Fearing. The 1870 town meeting passed a resolution to “tender our thanks to Mr. Fearing for this generous benefaction to his fellow-citizens, cherishing the belief that this is but the commencement of an institution which will confer incalculable advantages, not only upon the present but upon all future generations.”

Gratitude notwithstanding, there was no expectation on either side that the town would take responsibility for the Library as it did the schools and other departments. Although town meeting voted appropriations of \$500 to the Library in 1870 and again in 1871, the corporation remained entirely self-funded until 1933. In that year, according to a history written in the late 1940s, “\$1,200 and the balance of the dog tax was appropriated for the Library’s use.” Thank God for the dogs.

Things have changed. Today, Hingham tax dollars cover the Library’s operating costs — buildings and grounds, the light and fuel bills, etc. — and staff salaries, all of which make up about 76 percent of the Library’s total costs . To cover the rest— the books, media and programs — we still rely on the generosity of public-spirited citizens like Albert Fearing, lovers of the town and of its Library, who know it to be a place of beauty and learning and enjoyment and social life in the best sense, a place that many neighboring towns look upon with envy. We see that generosity, in large and in small ways, every day.

There are many kinds of support to the Library besides financial. For example, a remarkable corps of 103 dedicated volunteers keeps the Library going, giving 6,218 hours of hard work last year. But all of you

also support the Library, just by using it. It was not ever thus. In March 1873, the Trustees reported to the town that “the Library’s value for the purpose of reference and consultation by scholars, mechanics, farmers, indeed by persons of all professions and callings in the community is not appreciated as it should be...We are surprised at the limited number of applications for its use.”

That is no longer a problem. Today there are 14,276 cardholders, in a town of 21,700 people. On many days, a thousand people walk through the door. Last year, there were more than 266,000 visits to the Library, 420,000 items borrowed (or downloaded in the case of eBooks), and the number of participants in programs — the children’s story hour, Independent Movie Night, Osher Lifelong Learning classes, the guitar concert series — exceeded 10,000. Sessions on the Library web site exceeded 170,000. There’s no doubt that all these users are supporters. We have seen their largesse in many large and small ways.

So, all of us associated with the Library are grateful to all of you for your part — whatever that may be — in helping to sustain Albert Fearing’s dream. After all, you are the public “in the native town that he loved” — the reason the Library is here. Thank you very much.