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After New Orleans Main Library checked out, K&B Plaza checked in

BY SUE STRACHAN | STAFF WRITER AUG 19, 2019 - 4:58 PM

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New Orleans Public Library main branch at Lee Circle, Sept. 19, 1948. Photograph by Dorothy Violet Gulledge. The library was torn down in 1959 when the new main branch opened on Loyola Avenue. In its place the John Hancock building, better known now as K&B Plaza, was built.

Provided photo by Louisiana Division City Archives New Orleans Public Library

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When Scottish-American businessman and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie went on a spree funding and building libraries, his eyes and fortune eventually turned to New Orleans.

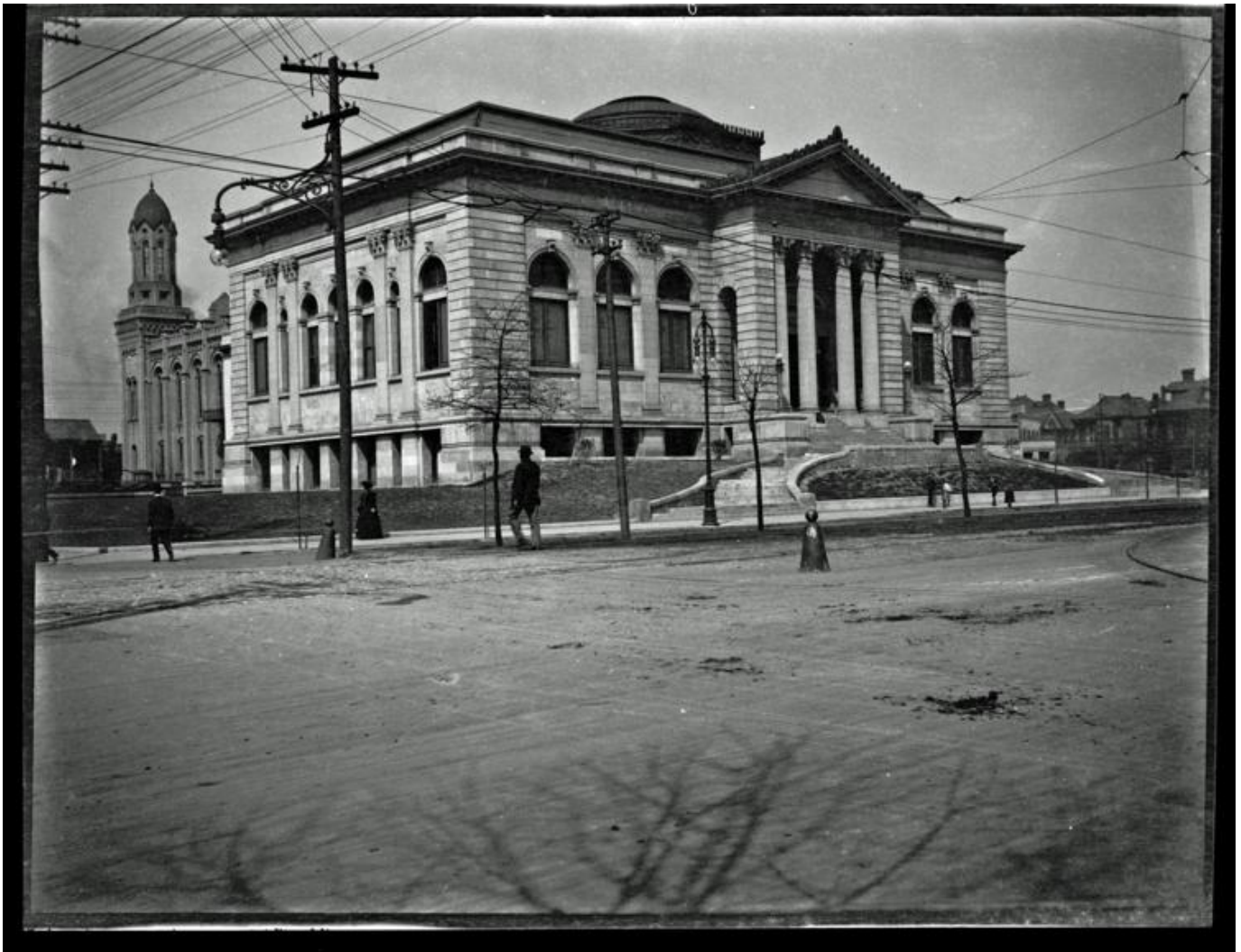
The city library, already established in 1843, had grown through the years. In 1902, it received a \$250,000 Carnegie grant to build a new Main Library and five additional libraries spread throughout the city. (Carnegie was to fund 2,509 around the world from 1883 to 1929.)

The land chosen for the Main Library was the site of the New Orleans and Carrollton Railroad Depot, located at that time on the corner of Tivoli Circle (now called Lee Circle), and remained there until it was torn down in 1866.

But there were some interesting changes in between. In 1871, the Masons wanted to build a temple at the location but only got as far as laying a foundation before they stopped.

Because the Masons never built on it, the foundation served as a stage for traveling circuses and other theatrical acts. It also was used as a temporary hall constructed in 1890 for

a German-American singing club, Saengerbund, to hold its festival, but it was cleared away by the Masons after only four days, states “New Orleans Then and Now” by Mariana and Richard Campanella.



New Orleans Public Library, main branch at Lee Circle, c. 1920 to 1930. Photograph by Alexander Allison. This main branch opened in 1908. The library was torn down in 1959 when the new main branch opened on Loyola Avenue. In its place the John Hancock building, better known now as K&B Plaza, was built.

Provided photo by Louisiana Division City Archives New Orleans Public Library

For the new library there, the architectural firm of Diboll, Owen and Goldstein designed a neo-Classical building. The library opened Oct. 15,

1908, followed by a grand opening fete on Oct. 31. (The firm also designed the Notre Dame Seminary and the New Orleans Criminal Court Building on Tulane Avenue.)

The Main Library remained there until 1958, when it was closed and its books, archives and other items moved to a new location on Loyola Avenue, in a contemporary building designed by Curtis and Davis.

The site got its own modern makeover: In 1962, Skidmore Owings and Merrill designed a contemporary seven-story building, which was occupied by the John Hancock Insurance Co. In 1974, the Besthoff family bought the property, now known as K&B Plaza and still owned by the Besthoffs. In 2017, the building was added to the National Register of Historic Places, which lists it as the John Hancock building.



A view of the K&B Plaza from Lee Circle, Aug. 20, 2019. The building, which opened in 1962, was designed by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill.

Photo by Sue Strachan | NOLA.com staff

Andrew Carnegie's legacy also lives on through the Carnegie Corp. of New York, a philanthropic fund established by Carnegie. And it's still funding libraries in New Orleans: In 2012, New Orleans Public Library's Rosa Keller Library and Community Center opened in Broadmoor, with the corporation among the donors.

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