

## CHARLES EDWARD FORBES

Now celebrating its 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Forbes Library in Northampton is often referred to as a jewel of the city. Interestingly, its founder, Charles E. Forbes, apparently did have some interest in men's jewelry, especially pocket watches. In his final will, he donates several of them along with their gold watch chains, to his beneficiaries. His fondness for the timepieces was a personality quirk as his reputation was that of a highly intelligent, frugal man. He was a shrewd investor and, in the aforementioned will, he left \$220,000 to the inhabitants of Northampton for the establishment of a public library.

Forbes was born in Bridgewater, Massachusetts in 1795 and died 85 years later in 1881. He was raised in the towns of Greenwich and Enfield Massachusetts both of which have been long submerged under the waters of the Quabbin Reservoir. He graduated from Brown University in 1815 and two years later came to Northampton to read the law with Attorney Elijah Mills. He passed the bar exam and, for the remaining sixty-four years of his life, Northampton was his home. A lifelong bachelor, Forbes never owned a home in town and merely rented a room from local citizens. But not being part of the landed gentry did not harm his professional career as he was soon considered one of the best legal minds in the Connecticut River valley.

In addition to the library, Forbes was to play a major role in the establishment of two other Northampton institutions. When the will of Oliver Smith, which created Smith Charities, was challenged by some relatives, the trustees hired Daniel Webster to defend it. Webster quickly brought on Forbes to team with him and together they successfully defended the will. A few decades later Forbes wrote the will of Sophia Smith that established Smith College. In February 1848 Forbes' legal reputation was of sufficient stature that he was appointed an associate justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. However, he served but eight months and resigned in October. He did not enjoy the back and forth travelling and the pace of Boston life which did not comport with his settled bachelor ways. After his resignation he apparently never again set foot in a courtroom but he continued his law practice and managed his investments. He was a major stock holder in the New Haven-Northampton Canal and then took his

profits from that venture and invested in railroads. The result was the large sum of money he left for the establishment of the library.

Forbes's will was a lengthy and explicit document. In it he stated "it has been my aim to place within reach of the inhabitants of a town, in which I have lived long and pleasantly, the means of learning, if they are disposed to learn.....". Earlier in the will he said, "It is my design to form a library of works of science and the arts in their broadest acceptation, of ancient and modern history, and of the literatures of our own and other nations.....". He desired as complete a panoply of knowledge in the library as possible including books on the histories of the world's various religions. But he took the time to include his negative thoughts on organized religion and directed that "none but laymen shall be competent to any employment, or fill any office, or exercise any control in the management of the library". Despite his disdain for clergy, it is interesting to note that paragraph 5 of the will bequeaths his pew in the Second Congregational Society back to the organization which indicates he was a member of the society.

Forbes gave the citizens of Northampton three years from the probate of his will to accept the library or else the funds would go to Harvard. The will provisions were quickly accepted at a town meeting in 1881 and a decision was made to allow the funds to accrue for ten years. The will also included a proviso that the library building should be fireproof and "disconnected from all other buildings as not to be endangered by fire originating in them". There followed much debate about where the library should be cited but, finally, the four-acre Turner property on West Street was chosen and construction of the library began in 1894.

It is interesting to wonder what Northampton would be like if Charles Forbes had not chosen to live here. Would Smith College be located somewhere else? Would Smith Charities even exist? What kind of library would the community have today? No one can say but more than a century and a quarter after Forbes's death, his benign influence enhances the quality of the area's life each and every day.

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Volunteer – Forbes Library