The branch would later expand to fill the entire firehouse in 1999.

School branches were replaced by a new Bookmobile in the 1960s, with additional outreach collections offered in the late 1970s at the Martin Luther King Center. In 1974, another addition to the side of a firehouse created the small 1,500 square feet Southwest Branch at 9010 Ridgewood Road. In 2,000, the branch was expanded to 5,373 square feet.

**Significant Dates**

1855: “Association” library founded
1864: Young Men’s Literary Association founded. They hire 15-year-old Ellen Gale as their director.
1872: YMLA turns collection, rented space & library director Ellen Gale over to the City to found the first public library in Rock Island.
Nov. 25, 1872: Rock Island 1st public library to open after the passing of the Library Act.
Dec. 15, 1903: Grand opening of the first permanent building at 401 19th Street.
1909: Library offers branch services in schools
1910: Library’s Children Services Dept forms
1937: Director Ellen Gale retires after 65 years with the public library (and four previous years with the private library.) She is the longest serving director in the nation.
1946: Ornamental roof trim removed
1955: Renovation of Main Library
1956: Reference Service begins
1957: 30/31 Branch added to fire station.
1960: Bookmobile serves schools, replacing former in-house “branches.”
1974: Southwest Branch added to fire station.
1986: Main Library renovated and expanded to 30,000 square feet

1989: Milan-Blackhawk Area Library District established; contracts with Rock Island to supply library services.
Feb. 18, 1999: 30/31 Branch closed for construction
Oct. 11, 1999: Expanded 4,441 sf 30/31 Branch reopens
Dec. 11, 1999: 30/31 Branch grand re-opening
June 19, 2000: Books move to trailer at the Southwest Branch
April 2001: Expanded 5,373 sf Southwest Branch reopens
August 2001: Grand reopening of Southwest Branch
Sept. 2006: Main Library closes for renovation.
Dec. 2007-May 9, 2008: Portico construction at Main Library south entrance
June 17, 2008: New south portico dedicated at Main Library
April -Oct. 2015: Exterior stonework & roofing restoration project at Main Library

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**Rock Island Library Directors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Director</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1872-1937</td>
<td>Ellen Gale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937-1948</td>
<td>Elsie Schocker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948-1968</td>
<td>Anne Benner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968-1972</td>
<td>Betty Kohler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973-1978</td>
<td>Leonard Meinhold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979-1982</td>
<td>Charles Perdue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983-1998</td>
<td>James Warwick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998-2012</td>
<td>Ava Ketter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013 -</td>
<td>Angela Campbell</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Photo resources:**
Rock Island Library special collections

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309-732-READ  www.RockIslandLibrary.org
Main Library: 401 19th Street  30/31 Branch: 3059 30th Street  Southwest Branch: 9010 Ridgewood Road
1855
The first library in Rock Island Library is established in 1855, as a private “Association” library. Subscriptions and donations from local business leaders funded the library, with members paying an annual $3 fee to check out materials. This original effort ended after two years.

1872-1903
Library facilities consist of rented rooms, the first of which is a 24 x 48 foot space in the Mitchell and Lynde Building just north of 2nd Avenue at 17th Street (now a bank).

1865
The privately funded “Young Men’s Literary Association” starts a library. To provide more revenue, the YMLA sponsors lectures with well-known speakers, such as Clara Barton and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

1872
Following the disastrous Chicago fire, the State of Illinois authorizes communities to assess taxes to provide public libraries. The YMLA board turns over its entire collection, rented space and even its library director, Miss Ellen Gale, to the City for the purpose of opening a truly public library. The Rock Island Public Library opens on November 25, 1872, making it the first Illinois public library to do so after the Act’s passing.

1901-1903
With space at a premium, the library board decides the library needs a permanent home, and construction begins in 1901 at 401-19th Street. The new Rock Island Public Library opens on Dec. 15, 1903. Local newspapers call it “Rock Island’s Temple of Literature.” Much funding came from two Rock Island businessmen, Frederick Denkmann and his brother-in-law Frederick Weyerhaeuser. Both became giants in the American lumber business.

1940s/1950s
The building undergoes major reconstruction and fire code changes, including:
- Removal of ornamental trim around the roof.
- Encasement of the skylight dome.
- Removal of the 2nd floor balcony.
- Flooring over the former rotunda.
- Installing an elevator at the main entrance.
- Moving the Children’s Room to the Ground Floor from its original home on the 2nd Floor. A stage was added to the room, creating a new Community Room for events.

1985
A large addition brings the Main Library to 30,000 square feet, adding more space for stacks and a mezzanine level. The renovation also sought to restore the authenticity of the original building by:
- Reopening the skylight dome with ornamentation underneath,
- Refurbishing and replacing original oak doors and brass door fixtures,
- Restoring the marble foyer to its original look, and
- Moving the elevator back to a central location.

The renovation also added a ground floor entrance on the south side for persons with a disability. As a finishing touch, the Harris and Katz families donated a sculptural fountain for the north side of the new addition. The official name for of the fountain is “Essere Umano” (to be human), although it is more commonly known as the “library swans.”

1995
A seven-month stone restoration and roofing project at the Main Library, funded by a Rock Island Capitol Improvement Project (CIP) project grant, restores the stability of the building’s exterior stonework.

Branching Out
In 1909, Rock Island Library began branch service to public schools, maintaining collections there to provide students with library services. A year later, the library established a full-fledged Children’s Department in what is now the Community Room. In 1957, a small room added to a City firehouse created the 30/31 Branch at 3059 30th Street.