

The Planning and Funding of the E. S. Bird Library

BY JOHN ROBERT GREENE AND KARRIE ANNE BARON

I had never dreamed that a great library
should bear my name.

--Ernest Stevenson Bird

The survey committee commissioned by Syracuse University found that Carnegie Library was “wholly inadequate in space for books and readers.” They also found that there was inadequate lighting, poor ventilation, bare walls, dangerous flooring, and dated equipment.

That survey was conducted in the academic year 1934-35.¹

Library renewal had long been a pet project of Chancellor William P. Tolley. In April 1958, on the first page of a new university publication--the *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier*--Tolley wrote that “it has long been clear that we must have a new building. . . . Only a very ambitious program can assure a library adequate for the standing of this university.”² During the first decade of Tolley’s leadership, this “ambitious program” centered on acquisitions. The holdings of the Carnegie Library had grown from approximately 417,374 volumes in 1955 to 522,549 volumes in 1960, ranking it fifty-second in the size of its total holdings compared with other college libraries in the country. By 1969, its holdings had increased 280 percent from its 1950 level--the fourth highest growth rate in the nation.³

Nevertheless, Carnegie, built in 1907, simply could not hold such a collection and adequately serve its clients. The venerable building shared with Hendricks Chapel and the Hall of Languages the distinction of being one of the most recognizable buildings on campus. But Carnegie had long been in a state of serious disrepair, and one 1968 estimate suggested that the building now contained twice the number of books and six times as many staffers as it had been intended to house.⁴ A short-term solution to these problems was a cumbersome system of branch libraries and storage annexes. Many of the older

books were stored in the lower three floors of the old Continental Can Company building on Erie Boulevard (many a student would go to Carnegie, ask for a book, only to be told, "It's in the can," and could not be retrieved for a week or more).⁵

As a result, there was markedly little debate over whether a new library would be built; by 1961, it was an assumed fact. The actual financing and building of that new library makes one of the most interesting stories of the Tolley years. The process came perilously close to being a financial fiasco, but instead resulted in what many observers call the crowning triumph of Tolley's chancellorship: the E. S. Bird Library.

William Tolley's dreams for the growth of the university were enormous; his plans for the regeneration of the university library were no exception. Originally, he had planned for a system of libraries to replace the antiquated Carnegie building. The first of these new libraries would serve the needs of the constituency for whose sake Tolley had expanded the university in the 1950s--upperclassmen and graduate students. In April 1962, Tolley wrote to Wayne S. Yenawine, then serving both as dean of the School of Library Science and director of the University Libraries: "I am in agreement that we will have more than one library. . . . The first library to be built should be a library to serve the needs of our faculty and our junior, senior, and graduate students. . . . I am not out of sympathy with the idea of an undergraduate library. When that question is studied, however, we may decide that the best answer for freshmen and sophomores is a series of modest collections and adequate study facilities in each of our dormitory areas." Unlike Carnegie, then, which was at that point largely an overstocked general library, the university's new library would be a modern research facility. Therefore, it would have to be a massive building, and none of the sites proposed to Tolley by his various planning boards suited the size of the building he had in mind. In the same letter to Yenawine, Tolley noted that he was not in favor of a location on the quad, largely because "it will be the most inaccessible part of the campus by automobile . . . [and] no one of the sites in the west quadrangle is large enough."⁶

Tolley began to look beyond the confines of the quad for a location for the library, and as a result he immediately clashed with fraternities and sororities, several of which would have to be relocated to

accommodate the site. It was not until February 1967 that Tolley was able to announce to the University Senate his chosen site: the block of Walnut Park between the Lowe Art Center and the Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity house. It was not the location, however, that bid most observers pause, but the size of the projected building and its cost. Tolley boasted that the new building (one of what Tolley originally envisioned to be three libraries--this large central library, along with a smaller undergraduate library and a separate building for rare books and manuscripts) would consist of a basement, six operational floors, and a penthouse, which would also house the university's George Arents Rare Book Room and Manuscript Collections. According to Tolley's first estimate, all this would cost the university approximately \$9,835,000--a price that was growing with every day the university delayed the start of construction, as Tolley was quick to point out.⁷

The search for funds for the new library hardly began in 1967. Ten years earlier, tobacco magnate George Arents, who had funded the Rare Book Reading Room in Carnegie, had bequeathed \$2,000,000 to the university, "which shall be used toward the cost of constructing and maintaining a new library for the university."⁸ Yet this was little more than a good start for a building such as Tolley envisioned, and the chancellor searched for other contributions. The need for a new library was a major part of the "Syracuse Plan," a fundraising campaign announced in the spring of 1961 that had as its goal \$76 million dollars to be accrued by 1970--the year of the university's centennial. On his list of needs that Syracuse Plan giving would cover, Tolley listed "Central University Library" for \$8,000,000.⁹

Yet fund-raising monies could not be counted upon exclusively, and Tolley began to seek a name donor for the new library. His first quarry seems to have been former New York Governor Averill Harriman. In May 1964, Tolley wrote to Harriman, then serving as Lyndon Johnson's undersecretary of state for political affairs, asking him to donate both his own personal papers and those of his family to Syracuse University. In return, Tolley suggested the creation of "an Averill Harriman University Library which would house your family papers as a part of our major research center in the field of public and international affairs and the humanities." Tolley noted that while "governmental, industrial, and foundation resources are increasingly available for higher education . . . we must look for help to a few dedicated individuals. . . . We need your help."¹⁰ While the University would eventually acquire Harriman's

gubernatorial papers, he made no promise of a substantial monetary donation. Tolley would have to look elsewhere.

Ernest Stevenson Bird was born in 1894 on a farm near Andover, New Jersey. He graduated from Syracuse University in 1916 with a degree in Liberal Arts, where he had been a classmate and fraternity brother of Tolley's brother Harold. Upon graduation, Bird taught math and science and coached at high schools in Ithaca, New York; Newark, New Jersey; and Wilmington, Delaware. After leaving the world of secondary education, Bird became a salesman for the American Book Publishing Company. At the time of his 1946 retirement from that same company, he was vice president in charge of sales.¹¹

Bird responded to Tolley's "Syracuse Plan" appeal for monies for a new library. The original pitch was that if a donor gave a certain amount of money, he or she would get a deferred income from the university based upon the amount donated. This arrangement appealed to the seventy-three-year-old Bird, and he asked how much money he and his wife would get for a \$10,000 donation. They then wrote the university a second time, mentioning a \$50,000 donation. Now quite interested, Tolley dispatched P. Lachlan Peck, director of Deferred Giving Programs, as the university's representative, to try to get a sizable donation from Bird. Peck was often accompanied by Horace Landry, professor of accounting, who would offer Bird tax advice about a possible donation. Landry remembered that "we began to realize that there was a lot more money in their estate. They didn't have any children or family, so the university was Steve Bird's first thought."¹² In October 1967, largely due to the efforts of Peck and Landry, Bird pledged the assets of two of his investment accounts to Syracuse University. At that date, the accounts were valued at \$2.5 million. For this deferred gift, the university was to provide the Birds a yearly sum of \$224,000, or seven percent of the total of the portfolio, over their lifetimes; when they had both died, the university would be able either to spend or invest the principal.

At first, Bird made no stipulations on his gift, except for the annuity. Peck was the first to mention a use for the money--a student union building which Tolley had long been promising.¹³ But Tolley had other ideas. Five days after being apprised of the gift, Tolley wrote Bird that "your gift . . . will, I think, prove to be the largest ever given by a graduate of the University," and suggested that:

I think both faculty and students, however, would agree that our major building need is a new library. It will probably cost about ten million dollars. We have some three million dollars in hand and we think we can get federal grants for about a third of the cost. We could also, if necessary, borrow from Federal sources as much as three million dollars at low interest. . . . No building will be more important or have a wider influence. I don't think we need to settle this immediately, but I would hope that while you are alive and able to find pleasure in it you would be involved in the planning of the building to bear your name and could have the satisfaction of seeing it while you and Mrs. Bird are still here. Our problem is not so much to have cash in hand for construction as to know that it can and will be financed.¹⁴

Bird responded with a letter of some warmth:

When your letter came I read it to my wife but the reading process was interrupted several times by the inability of my eyes to see and of my voice to function properly. Your letter has made me very happy and my wife very proud. . . . I had never dreamed that a great library should bear my name. I am truly overwhelmed. . . . I naturally wish our contribution could have been larger and I am sorry the market chose this particular time to turn bearish.¹⁵

As the new year opened, the university had a promise of the largest gift ever given by an alumnus, and it seemed that Tolley would soon have his library. However, what had begun as a tremendous example of alumni largesse soon turned into a frustrating situation for all concerned. Despite his promise, Bird suddenly seemed unwilling to transfer his stock portfolio to the university. The January 1968 Tet Offensive in Vietnam had sent the stock market into a nosedive, and it seems that Bird was holding onto his portfolio until the market recovered so that he might deliver the total amount promised to Tolley.

Concerned, Peck and Landry traveled back and forth to see Bird, hoping that they could cajole him into transferring the portfolio as soon as possible. Bird would not be rushed, but he was rankled by Tolley's sense of urgency. On 16 January 1968, Bird wrote to Peck claiming that "I fear that you and Dr. Tolley wonder why I have delayed making the transfer and the longer the delay the more concerned I have become. I feel as though I were a pecan between the jaws of a nut cracker. I don't particularly relish this kind of pressure--in fact, I'm not standing up to it too well. . . . the market is not doing what I hoped it would. I'm beginning to wonder if it will and when it will."¹⁶

Tolley quickly responded to his newest benefactor:

Lachlan Peck has shared your letters with me. I think I can understand the way you feel as the stock market reflects the bearishness of world and war news. Our concern is not about the value of the portfolio at the present time. I am confident that before the Ernest S. Bird Library is completed the market will be higher than it was six months ago. What bothers me is the possibility of severe shrinkage of the estate by legal and banking fees, [and] possible litigation and taxes by State and Federal authorities if something should happen to you before the transfer of securities is made.¹⁷

Nevertheless, another month passed by, and the portfolio had yet to be delivered. Clearly frustrated with the situation, Bird wrote to Tolley in March, noting that it is "more of a worry giving away this money than it was accumulating it." Bird also acknowledged making a mistake in not turning over the portfolio at the end of in 1967, but he had "expected the customary rise in January and that never developed."¹⁸

Yet the status of Bird's portfolio was not the only problem that Tolley was facing as he attempted to bring a new library into existence. Other events were converging on Tolley--many of them reflecting the passion caused on campus by the antiwar and civil rights movements--that are too detailed to be presented here. However, such events, and Tolley's reaction to them, had led many arms of the university

to nudge Tolley to retire in this, the twenty-sixth year of his chancellorship. Tolley knew that Bird Library would be his last physical contribution to the campus that he had rebuilt; the pressure was now on at least to have construction begun at the time of his retirement. Landry and Peck stepped up the pace of their negotiations. Landry remembers that “the last time that [we] were out there together we finally persuaded him that now was the time to do it. The market was in good health and rising. . . . He hit it right.”¹⁹ The transfer of Bird’s portfolio was finally completed on 23 April 1968. The total of the original gift was \$2,903,400.82, which included a \$150,000 gift from his wife. However, when Bird found out that the university’s press release had announced that he had given \$3 million, he sent additional funds to make up the difference.²⁰

Yet even Bird’s gift did not solve the university’s financial woes regarding the embryonic Bird Library. The contract to construct the building was signed on 16 May 1969. The low bidder, Vincent J. Smith, Inc. of Binghamton, budgeted an amount of \$11,690,000, some \$1,500,000 above Tolley’s estimated cost. But Tolley would not be slowed. At their June 1968 meeting, he told the board of trustees that “because we felt that any delay would only add to construction costs, we decided to go ahead. The unexpected additional costs will, of course, have an adverse effect on other construction urgently needed.”²¹ During the 12 November 1968 board of trustees meeting, Tolley announced that he had all the money necessary to finance the new library, and the building would be completed in July 1971.²²

The problem was that Tolley simply did not have all the pledged cash on hand to pay for the building. Though Ernest Bird died in February 1974, his wife lived until 1988, thus tying up the principal of the major gift for the library. Other major gifts to the library drive had also come unraveled. The gift of Florence Bailey Crouse, who had been a prime mover in getting other trustees to donate to the library, offers but one example of the troubles that Tolley faced. In February 1968, the Internal Revenue Service refused to allow the executors of the Crouse estate to pay the \$75,000 which she had pledged to the “Syracuse Plan” for the library. While the IRS recognized that she had indeed *made* the pledge, since it was not in her will, it was not an enforceable obligation.²³

Thus, while construction began on Bird Library in the summer of 1969, several months after Tolley's retirement, it was not entirely clear how the building would be paid for. Tolley's successor, John Corbally, found that Bird Library was the most expensive of several buildings which were either under construction, or in the planning stages, for which funding was not yet complete. While Corbally did not serve as chancellor long enough to solve the problem, his attempts to do so were potentially troublesome. For example, Walter M. Beattie, then dean of the School of Social Work, learned that a \$400,000 grant that had been given to the School of Social Work in 1962 by the Gifford Foundation to construct a building for his school had been given by Corbally to the fund to complete Bird Library.²⁴ Despite such creative financing, it was left to Melvin Eggers, the university's ninth chancellor, to deal with the almost \$9 million in unfunded buildings; at that time the Bird Library was some \$3 million underfunded. Eggers, who was committed to the completion of the library's construction, financed the structure with short-term loans from the State Dormitory Authority and through some budgetary reallocation.²⁵

The final cost to the institution for the Ernest Stevenson Bird Library was approximately \$14 million. The funding was never completely attained until 1988, the year of Marie Bird's death. Nevertheless, it is hard to disagree with Eggers, who contended that "the [Bird] library is Chancellor Tolley's crowning glory. I will forever be grateful for his having gotten that building underway. . . . [It] was worth every cent."²⁶

Note: This essay is adapted from *Syracuse University: The Tolley Years, 1942-1969*, to be published by Syracuse University Press in the spring of 1996. The authors wish to thank Amy Doherty and her staff at the Syracuse University Archives for their research assistance, as well as the late Chancellor Emeritus William P. Tolley for permission to use the records of his tenure, found in the Syracuse University Archives.

FOOTNOTES

John Robert Greene, professor of history and communication at Cazenovia College, received a Ph.D. in modern history from Syracuse University. He has written four books on the United States presidency, most recently *The Presidency of Gerald R. Ford* (1995). In the spring of 1996 his *Syracuse University: The Tolley Years, 1942-1969* will be published by Syracuse University Press.

Karrie Anne Baron, a senior at SUNY Geneseo, has been Professor Greene's research assistant in the writing of *Syracuse University: The Tolley Years, 1942-1969*. She is studying to become a speech pathologist.

1. Daniel Brassell, "Syracuse University Library, 1871-1972," *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* 9 (4) and 10 (1) (1972): 21.

2. William P. Tolley, "A Note to the Reader," *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* (April 1958), 1.

3. See Yenawine Report, 5 October 1960, William P. Tolley Records, Syracuse University Archives; Syracuse University press release, 22 February 1974.

4. Brassell, "Syracuse University Library," 25.

5. Along with the approximately 90,000 cataloged volumes, and some 8,000 volumes listed by author only in Carnegie's card catalog, the Continental Can Building also housed all of the manuscript collections that could not be accommodated in the Harriman Room at Carnegie, as well as the Order Department, the Gift and Exchange Department, and the Music Library.

6. Tolley to Yenawine, 10 April 1963, Tolley Records.

7. Syracuse University press release, 16 February 1967; *Daily Orange*, 16 February 1967.

8. "Last Will and Testament of George Arents" (27 February 1959), Tolley Records; *Syracuse Herald-Journal*, 17 December 1960.

9. Minutes, Syracuse University board of trustees meeting, 25 March 1961, Syracuse University Archives.

10. Tolley to Harriman, 20 May 1964, Tolley Records.

11. Syracuse University press release, 8 May 1968.
12. Horace Landry, interview with Karrie A. Baron, 29 June 1995.
13. Peck to Tolley, 4 October 1967, Tolley Records.
14. Tolley to Bird, 9 October 1967, Tolley Records.
15. Bird to Tolley, 9 November 1967, Tolley Records.
16. Bird to Peck, 16 January 1968, Tolley Records.
17. Tolley to Bird, 29 February 1968, Tolley Records.
18. Bird to Tolley, 18 March 1968, Tolley Records.
19. Horace Landry, interview with Karrie A. Baron, 29 June 1995.
20. Note, 23 April 1968, Tolley Records. Bird's humility, despite the size of his gift, was genuine.

He made it clear to Peck that he didn't want to be mentioned as the name donor in any of the university's press releases, and requested that the building be named the William P. Tolley Library--a request that Tolley denied. Horace Landry also remembers that when the press release announcing the gift identified Bird as the vice president of American Book Publishing Company, Bird protested, claiming that he had been "only a salesman." (Horace Landry, interview with Karrie A. Baron, 29 June 1995.)

21. Minutes, Syracuse University board of trustees meeting, 6 June 1969.

22. Minutes, Syracuse University board of trustees meeting, 12 November 1968. The library construction line in the capital budget submitted to the board on that date read:

Estimated cost:	\$11,388,000
Cash and Pledges:	\$ 6,675,205
Construction Grants and Loans:	
*Title I:	\$2,491,264
Title II:	\$1,922,931
Total:	\$2,023,518 (awarded)

*Title I award \$1,670,923 to date--supplement application to be submitted after construction starts. Title II proposal increased from \$1,281,954 to \$1,922,931 with change of federal participation from 1/3 to 1/2 eligible costs.

Balance to Finance: -----

Remarks: Working drawings 70 percent complete; Bid 2/69; completion due 7/71.

23. Peck to Bird, 28 February 1968; and Tolley to Bird, 29 February 1968, Tolley Records.
24. Walter M. Beattie, interview with Greene, 29 August 1995.
25. Minutes, Syracuse University board of trustees meeting, 2 June 1972; Melvin Eggers, interview with authors, 21 June 1994.
26. Melvin Eggers, interview with authors, 21 June 1994.