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The Name-Dropper: Hackensack's Johnson Public Library

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Hackensack's Johnson Library was named for philanthropist William Mindred Johnson, who donated the land, building and funds for books.

Who was Lee of Fort Lee, Votee of Votee Park and Merritt of Camp Merritt? The Name-Dropper gives you the lowdown on some of the people whose names you see on public statues, memorial plaques, park signs, highways and even some local streets around North Jersey. Have suggestions? Email them to features@northjersey.com and put Name-Dropper in the subject field.

William M. Johnson made few demands in 1900 when he presented a gift of some land and a building to the town of Hackensack.

The building, he insisted, must always be the site of a free public library, a facility whose construction and early operating costs he would bear almost singlehandedly. OK, Hackensack said.

If, however, the town ever decided to end such use, ownership of the property would go to Princeton University, Johnson's alma mater. Fine, Hackensack said.

The town's easy agreement was based on history. There had been a succession of failed attempts to open and sustain a library and now, here was Johnson, a man with a lot of money and a willingness to spend for the public good.

So he deeded the real estate at Main and Camden streets, paid for the library's construction and presented it with \$5,000 for the purchase of books, according to "A History of the Johnson Library," a research paper written by Kathryn Cannarozzi, a Johnson librarian, for a San Jose State University class on the history of libraries.

"[He] then generously paid all the expenses for the first year of operation," Cannarozzi notes, "including the salaries of a trained librarian and two assistants."

Johnson was so committed to a free library for the 9,443 residents of Hackensack that he wound up spending more than \$100,000 on it, and later donated more when the library needed an expansion.

In addition, he picked up the costs of decorative landscaping and paid for reading tables, described at the time by the Hackensack Republican newspaper as "dark, solid and massive, as though made to last for centuries." The library survived its first century; the tables

did not.

The library was popular from the start. On opening day in October 1901, 258 people joined. Books were borrowed by 199 adults and 58 children. By the end of its first year, the Johnson Library had lent 6,500 books. But by 1915 more space was needed, and along came William M. Johnson with his checkbook and \$30,000, as reported by George Mercer Scudder in "Historic Facts About Hackensack" (1999).

In 1951, the city observed the library's half-century anniversary with a plaque in the lobby citing Johnson's "outstanding philanthropy." The plaque also bore a bas-relief of William M. Johnson, a slim man in a starched collar and with a shock of beard and moustache.

William Mindred Johnson was born in 1847 in Newton and, after graduating from Princeton, read the law and opened a practice in Hackensack.

Philanthropy

He also spent a great part of his life accumulating wealth and coming up with ways to spend it on what The Bergen Evening Record described as his four pet charities: the library, Hackensack Hospital, Princeton and several churches in the Hackensack area.

In his obituary in 1928, The New York Times described the hospital as Johnson's "hobby" and estimated his gifts to it at nearly \$1 million. He also put up \$250,000 to build a nurses residence.

Johnson's modesty matched his philanthropy.

In a glowing editorial, The Bergen Evening Record described his projects as "several monuments which will endure for all time."

But these undertakings were hushed matters, The Record declared, adding that the hospital's ledgers "tell a story of quiet philanthropy, the total sum of money involved being far beyond the estimate of even his friends."

He sought privacy, but every so often Johnson would be questioned by a curious reporter. The Record recalled his stock response: "Please do not spoil my humble effort by telling the world about it. Let the good which comes from it suffice."

When he wasn't contributing to one cause or other, Johnson maintained his law practice and won two terms in the state Senate as the first Republican elected in 25 years from Bergen County. He was president of the Senate and, as a result, served as acting governor for three months. He left the Senate when President William McKinley appointed him assistant postmaster. Later he co-founded the Hackensack Trust Co. and served on the boards of directors of several major corporations and banks. He represented New Jersey at two Republican national conventions.

All this was dwarfed by one wrenching tragedy.

Walter Whitfield Johnson, 16, the eldest of the three sons of Johnson and his wife, Maria, became gravely ill in 1891 while attending the Lawrenceville School. The Hackensack Republican reported that Walter had contracted spinal meningitis. Doctors feared he would not survive more than a few days and summoned his parents. Two days later Walter was dead.

For the next three decades Johnson continued in business, law and charity and remained active in a score of clubs and professional organizations.

"The Genealogical History of Hudson and Bergen Counties" (Cornelius Burnham Harvey, ed., (1900) called Johnson "one of the most conspicuous figures in the public and political life."

He died of acute bronchitis in 1928.