



A BRIEF HISTORY OF Leonard Library

Top: Leonard Library's exterior, 1908

Above: Librarian assisting children inside Leonard Library (c. 1940s)

Leonard Library is one of Brooklyn Public Library's original Carnegie branches, a generation of libraries built by Scottish businessman and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie in the early 1900s. The branch officially opened its doors on December 1, 1908, on the corner of Devoe and Leonard streets in Williamsburg.

Only one block from busy Metropolitan Avenue and situated on a leafy residential street, Leonard Library fills an important niche in this lively and changing community, and always has. In records from 1941, a visiting member of the Friends of Brooklyn Public Library refers to it as “one of the very nicest branches—full of sunshine, used mostly by children and high school students.”

The single-story building was designed by architect William B. Tubby, who designed Pratt Library and many Romanesque and Dutch Revival-style buildings throughout Brooklyn. While the branch's austere classical facade remains largely unchanged, inside the main floor once featured wood-trimmed windows, wood paneling and a molded plaster ceiling with skylights. In 2015, the Friends of Leonard Library was re-formed, and have transformed the rear lot of the library into a learning garden.

Leonard Library holds a place in literary hearts for being featured in Betty Smith's iconic novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. In the book, Francie Nolan visited the library and discovered that “the world was hers for the reading.” In 2008, Brooklyn Public Library staff joined Smith's family and the NYC Parks Department to plant a tree in the author's memory outside of the branch.



Photo courtesy of Nancy Pfeiffer

Betty Smith was born in Brooklyn in 1896 to German-American parents. The family lived in several Williamsburg tenements before settling at 702 Grand Street, four blocks from the newly built Leonard Library where Smith became a frequent visitor. As a young woman she volunteered at the School Settlement Association and helped her mother support the family, before eventually moving away to Ann Arbor and then North Carolina—but her early years in Brooklyn shaped the story in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, which she wrote in 1943.

Above: The author on her fire escape

Leonard Library Paintings

Living in New York City for many years, I have become accustomed to the way the city thrives on change. However, I was always curious about the culture and the past that made this unique part of Brooklyn what it was. When I discovered the scrapbooks and writing of Eugene Armbruster, the amateur historian and author of Brooklyn's *Eastern District*, I realized the importance of creating time capsules and recording the details of a place for posterity. Around the same time, I read *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and was changed forever. Betty Smith's character, Francie, allowed me experience my own neighborhood as she would have, in 1912.

Researching historic photos of Williamsburg and poring over the vivid details in Betty Smith's descriptions has

been a kind of time travel, allowing me to notice the similarities in eras. The details may be different but many experiences of daily life remain the same: the peace of a sun-dappled seat on a fire escape or the thrill of a city street full of vehicles and people in a rush. I chose to illustrate those two scenes because of the timelessness of both—the quiet, intimate home life and the public, bustling street life—that all New Yorkers share.

The children's section at Leonard Library feels like a natural fit for art that would inspire the library's youngest patrons. I worked in Gouache paint because its vivid color and translucency makes the paintings feel like children's book illustrations rather than paint on canvas. I hope that visitors to Leonard Library will discover more details in the scenes as they return and look at the paintings over time.

This process has made me realize that *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is important to people both here



Artist Amy Lyons at work in her Brooklyn studio

in Williamsburg and beyond. The book is set in a very specific time and place that is magical and charming, in spite of its rough characters and conditions. It holds a universal symbol in that sheltering tree which somehow sprouts from dead earth, reminding us all that beauty and life can grow within the most difficult circumstances.

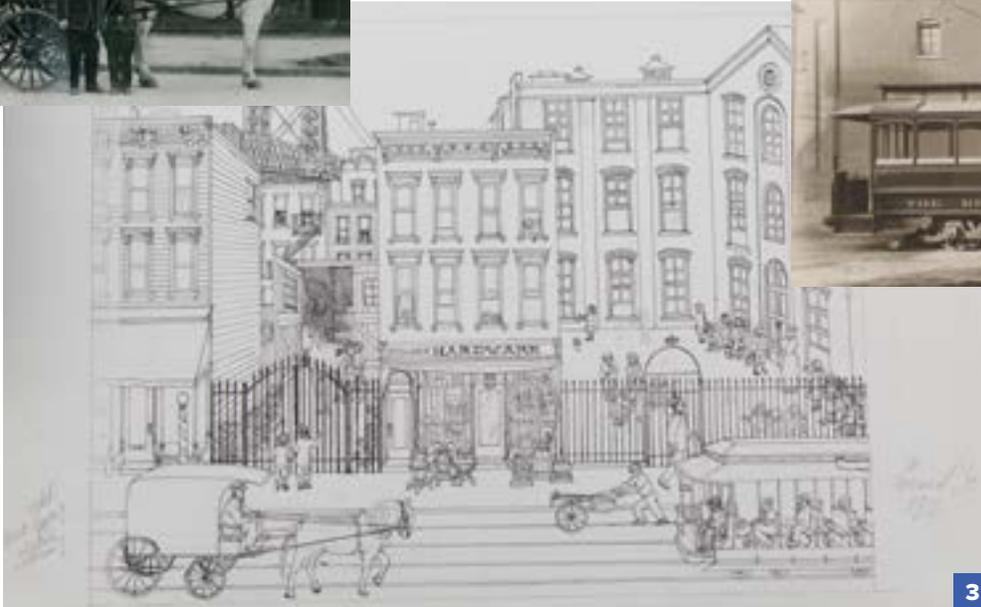
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1. Horse-drawn delivery wagons were common feature in early 1900s Brooklyn
2. Williamsburg Bridge trolley car
3. Sketch of Lyons' painting, showing how historic detail was incorporated to recreate the feel of Williamsburg in 1912



This art installation was made possible thanks to the Friends of Leonard Library. To become a member, visit the library.

The programming series to unveil these paintings is generously supported by HarperCollins Publishers, Casa Publica and Blue Angel Wines

