

Connecting Communities

The Formation of the Ypsilanti District Library and Beyond

BY SARAH ZAWACKI

Educating the Community

Libraries have long been cornerstones of communities, connecting citizens with information, entertainment, and more. The Ypsilanti District Library (YDL), in various iterations, has been providing these resources and services to the area for more than 150 years. The last fifty years have been particularly important to the library. It has grown significantly during this time, expanding from a public library funded by the City of Ypsilanti to an independent library district serving the three communities of the City of Ypsilanti, Ypsilanti Township, and Superior Township. As a unifying presence among different communities, YDL maintains a mission “to enrich life, stimulate intellectual curiosity, foster literacy, and encourage an informed citizenry.” Throughout the decades, one thing has remained clear: community members cherish the Ypsilanti District Library and all it has to offer.

In 1868, six women opened a “ladies’ library” in the Arcade Building on Huron Street in Ypsilanti, featuring a collection of 175 books and a subscription fee of \$1. This marked the beginning of library services to the Ypsilanti community. Eventually, the Ladies’ Library Association of Ypsilanti, as it was officially named, expanded into the Starkweather house on Huron Street, a gift from Mrs. Mary Ann Starkweather herself.

In 1889, the Ypsilanti Common Council voted to take over the library’s expenses and waived the subscription fee. The City of Ypsilanti officially took over the operation of the library in 1949 and changed the name to the Ypsilanti Public Library. By 1963, the library had moved to the former post office building on Michigan Avenue. Importantly, the city began contracting with Ypsilanti Township to provide library services to its citizens at this time. This was the beginning of a partnership that eventually led to the formation of the future library district.

Economic hardships hit Ypsilanti and the rest of the country in the 1970s. The library

faced multiple budget cuts and struggled to survive, despite the mayor and city council doing their best to keep things afloat. In 1982, the city proposed that the library close permanently.

However, library supporters quickly sprang into action to find a solution. The Ypsilanti Library Advisory Board was formed to explore all potential options. The board decided that the formation of an independent library district comprising the City of Ypsilanti and Ypsilanti Township, and supported by a dedicated millage, would be the best path forward. Such a district would separate the library from local politics; allow for increased staffing, hours, and materials; and provide an opportunity for more long-term planning, including the potential for another branch. The proposed library district would have its own elected board of trustees, made up of citizens from both municipalities, to govern it.

Getting a millage passed was no easy feat. First, both Ypsilanti and Ypsilanti Township officials had to approve the plan in order for it to be on the ballot. This was achieved and the question placed on the April 1982 ballot. The Advisory Board, the Friends of the Library, and library supporters worked hard to gain support for the millage, adopting the slogan “Save Your Library.” Supporters participated in local parades; had an information booth at the Heritage Festival; held phone banking sessions; sent letters to civic leaders; received endorsements from the Ypsilanti Area Chamber of Commerce and others; and had local groups, like the UAW, include millage information in their newsletters. Then, just days before the election, the library closed on March 25, 1982, due to a lack of funds. If the millage vote failed, the library would not re-open, a dismaying thought to many in the community.

All the hard work paid off. The library district millage received overwhelming approval by voters in both the city and the township. The two municipalities chose to unite their communities around the library. The library building reopened just a few months later on June 1. The newly created Ypsilanti District Library immediately set to work to provide its patrons with a top-notch library experience.

During the 1980s and 1990s, renovations were completed at the Michigan Avenue branch, the materials collection was evaluated and expanded, new township branches called Roundtree and Peters opened, and a campaign for Superior Township to join the district began. By the 2020s, YDL had grown to three library branches and a bookmobile, all unique in their own ways.

Let’s take a closer look at each one.

YDL-Michigan Avenue, City of Ypsilanti

The Michigan Avenue library, in the former post office building, has been a recognizable landmark in downtown Ypsilanti for generations. For a historic building, a lot of technological changes in library service have taken place over the past fifty years.

One such change was computer automation of library book and patron records in the early 1990s. Staff recall having to use a regiscope film camera to keep track of checked out materials: the machine would take a picture of the patron's library card and a book's check-out card. It was quite a time-consuming process! With barcodes, both for books and patrons, everything could be handled by the computer. This freed up time for staff to work on other projects.

Additional technological advancements over the years included the switch from a physical card catalog to an electronic one, the introduction of computers for public use, the arrival of the internet, and YDL's very own podcast. As of 2023, YDL-Michigan has served the downtown community for nearly sixty years and is still going strong, providing reference and computer help; a curated collection of materials for children, teens, and adults; and a variety of programming.



Ypsilanti District Library, Michigan Avenue

YDL-Bookmobile, Districtwide

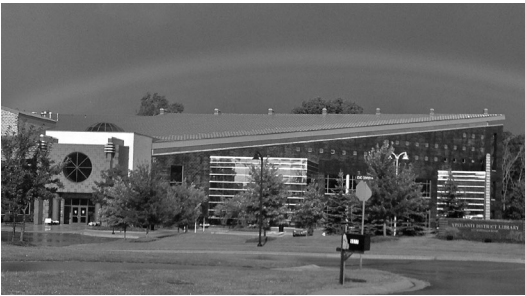
The bookmobile is a mobile library and has been a familiar sight in the Ypsilanti area for decades. The library's first bookmobile debuted in 1969 and one continues to operate today, visiting neighborhoods and schools. It is a great way to excite students about their library and for patrons to conveniently get materials without having to travel. Before YDL-Whittaker was built, the bookmobile served patrons in rural areas that had not yet developed. Staff recall driving the bookmobile down dirt roads and seeing people pass by on horseback. The YDL bookmobile has also been a staple at the Ypsilanti Fourth of July parade, delighting onlookers of all ages. Step aboard the bookmobile in 2022 and you'll find more than 4,000 library items to choose from.



Ypsilanti District Library Bookmobile, District wide

YDL-Whittaker Road, Ypsilanti Township

One of the biggest YDL accomplishments in the past fifty years was the building and opening of the Whittaker Road branch. During the 1990s, a bigger library branch



Ypsilanti District Library Whittaker Branch, Ypsilanti Township

emerged as a top priority for YDL, due to increased library use by a growing population. After considering various locations, including the old Ypsilanti High School building on Cross Street, a piece of land on Whittaker Road in southern Ypsilanti Township was chosen for the new branch. The public showed their support for the library by passing a bond to fund the new building.

The 60,000-square-foot, two-story building, an architectural marvel, opened on January 7, 2002.

The collection nearly doubled in size with all the new space, plus the new building featured a computer lab, a multipurpose community space, a local history room, and much more. Excited patrons celebrated their new library that day, parking all along Whittaker Road just to experience the new building. YDL celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the Whittaker Road location in 2022. It remains a much-loved treasure of the community.

YDL-Superior, Superior Township

Since it became an independent library district, YDL was able to explore the possibility of adding more municipalities to its service area. One such community was Superior Township, which had contracted with the library at different times over the past fifty years, but it was not a legal part of the library's district. There were always strong supporters of the library in Superior Township, and they advocated over the years for additional library services that the community could enjoy if it joined the library district.

Once again, local support of the library was evident when Superior Township voted to join the Ypsilanti District Library on August 8, 2006. The next year, a township branch opened on MacArthur Boulevard in the fire station, with plans for an independent branch already in the works. Unfortunately, the economic recession that began in 2008 delayed those plans, but YDL remained dedicated to building a branch for Superior Township no matter what. A successful millage passed in 2018 which provided funding for the new building.

The new Superior Township library opened on November 14, 2022, to much excitement. A month prior to the opening, more than four hundred community members joined together in a “book brigade” to move the materials from the old building to the new one. It was another wonderful example of YDL patrons showing their love for their library. YDL is excited to have expanded its presence in Superior Township and looks forward to serving the community in new and improved ways.



Ypsilanti District Library Superior Branch,
Superior Township

The Ypsilanti District Library Today

The Ypsilanti District Library has evolved in numerous ways since its formation. Although the original iteration of the library more than 150 years ago focused on lending books, it has expanded over the years to offer a variety of materials and services. There have been national traveling exhibits displayed, songwriting workshops held with well-known musicians, a school readiness service named TALK (Text and Learn for Kindergarten), multiple TEDx events held for community members to share their knowledge and wisdom, tax forms prepared for low-income and senior patrons, mayoral forums that hosted local candidates, digital collections created such as an archive of local Black oral histories, Wi-Fi hotspots lent, and much more.

The YDL of 2023 features not only expected items like books (those are never going away!) and DVDs, but a Library of Things: non-traditional items to check out such as sewing machines, musical instruments, board games, tools, and even a ghost hunting kit. These are items that patrons may need to use only once or may want to try before buying their own. (And it is not a new idea. YDL-Michigan actually lent paintings by local artists in the 1990s.) All in all, the communities making up the library's district can enjoy more than 400,000 items available to check out. There is truly something for everyone.

It is impossible to discuss the past fifty years without mentioning 2020. The whole world changed in 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic. To protect the health of patrons and staff, YDL closed on March 13, 2020. It would not reopen to the public for several months while the pandemic raged on. However, library staff remained dedicated during this time, quickly adapting to ever-changing circumstances. Staff made calls to senior patrons to check in and see if they needed anything, hosted virtual storytimes for children, and provided curbside pickup for library materials. The library even distributed free COVID-19 tests to patrons. In these unprecedented times, patrons could rely on YDL to be there, demonstrating the important role of libraries to communities.

What started out as an idea for a library among six women has blossomed over the years into a full-fledged presence in the Ypsilanti area. Like any institution, there have been ups and downs, but the Ypsilanti District Library has always remained dedicated to being a trusted community resource. Overall, it has been an exciting fifty years for YDL, going from one branch to three, plus a bookmobile, and continuously striving to bring patrons new and unique services and collections. Who knows what the next fifty years will bring!

Thank you to the communities of Ypsilanti, Ypsilanti Township, and Superior Township for all their support of the Ypsilanti District Library.

A Note on Sources

This chapter was written using a variety of sources: newspaper articles, YDL staff interviews, and YDL documents and newsletters. All images belong to the Ypsilanti District Library.

About the Author

Sarah Zawacki, MLIS, is the former head librarian of the acquisitions department at the Ypsilanti District Library.