



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Sam Walter Foss said he ‘believed it is important to increase circulation’ and that ‘people [should] have access to the books on the shelves.’ So while he was a director he added a reference room, a children’s room, and a school department ...During his tenure, circulation increased from 193,000 in 1897 to 353,300 in 1904.”

-From “Sam Walter Foss: Somerville Librarian & Poet,” Somerville Public Library website (somer villepubliclibrary.org)

Sometimes when I visit a library I am particularly struck by the effort made to clearly explain everything to the library users. This happened recently when I was at the central branch of the Somerville, Massachusetts Public Library. The signs and the printed material had a friendly and informational tone that was not only helpful but also supported the idea this library is a place to get the information you need. For instance, I picked up a simple black on white tri-fold brochure, made from plain 8 1/2 by 14 paper, called *Museum Passes*. It describes the museums, hours, locations, the number of people who can use the pass, fees and any other necessary facts. The language is forthright and welcoming, so even the rules – introduced by the words “Please Note...” listed on the back don’t sound punitive.

The tone of a library can be subtle, yet for me it is one of the most important ways libraries let their public know how welcome they are. When I went

to the website for this library, I wasn’t surprised to find there is a virtual tour of it which presents an explanation of every department. For instance, for the circulation desk it says: “Why are we called the circulation desk? This is where you may check out, renew and return circulating materials.” It then goes on to give “Questions the Circulation Desk can answer,” like: How long can I keep a book?”

Besides the highlighted floor plans, the tour has a “Take a look around the room” feature, so that using a computer mouse you can get a 360 degree look at any of the areas, including the outside of the building. As they say on the website, “the tour is designed to introduce you to the layout, facilities, and services of the library. By the end you will have a good idea of where departments are located, how they can help you, and who to ask if you have particular questions.”

Another great feature of this library is the Greek frieze

continued on page 2

that circles the room just below the very high ceiling. I was told it is based on the Parthenon frieze and depicts a parade into the stadium. It is amazing to look up from the computers, books and oak tables to see this parade of people and animals.

In addition, SPL has an AV (audio-visual) department that is quite a contrast to the Chapel Hill, North Carolina library I mentioned in a recent column. The Chapel Hill library has few AV materials, while SPL has a large room devoted to them. There are foreign films, musical scores, CDs, books-on-tape, DVDs, videos, AV reference books, an AV reference desk, and even a DVD player, where a young woman was wearing headphones and watching a movie on a large monitor. The rack of music magazines has titles like *Gramophone* and *Sound and Vision*, as well as *Spin* and *Acoustic Guitar*. A posted flyer advertised a weekly European Film Series, and

the ESL (English as a Second Language) materials offer an extensive range of languages like Haitian-Creole, Turkish, Arabic and French.

It is obvious this library truly reflects the community it serves and I am grateful to the staff, particularly Maura, who took the time to tell me more about it.