

# SILAS BRONSON

*"Not forgetful of his native town, he bequeathed to it the fruit of his industry for the establishment of a free public library....Let all who read these books and find help and comfort in them cherish his memory."*

— From the tablet in the Library. Written by Dr. Joseph Anderson.

Silas Bronson, born in the West Farms section of Waterbury on February 15, 1788, left his native town as a young man to pursue work that took him first to the South and later to New York City. Though he seldom returned to Waterbury after his boyhood, he remembered it with affection as evidenced by the bequest of \$200,000 for the founding and support of a free public library. Since 1869, public library service in Waterbury has emanated from the Silas Bronson Library.

One of eight children, born into a family of modest means, he received a limited common school education. He worked for four years as a carpenter and joiner, after which he moved to Georgia where he spent fifteen years as a merchant. In 1830, he moved back north, engaging in the business of importing and jobbing dry goods.

Bronson was an intimate friend of Matthew Vassar who founded Vassar College in Poughkeepsie. Inspired by Vassar's philanthropy, he determined to provide for an institution of learning that would endure through the ages. He died November 24, 1867, and in February 1868 the Common Council of Waterbury appointed a committee to recommend a course of action in regard to the receipt and use of his bequest. A Board of Agents was formed for the management of the library fund, and the first location of the new library was on Leavenworth Street facing the Green.

In 1894, a handsome brick, terra cotta and tile structure in the Italian Renaissance style, was opened on Grand Street as the Silas Bronson Library, and continued to provide service for nearly 70 years. By the 1960s, the building was deemed no longer adequate and a campaign for a new library was initiated by Librarian Emelyn Trimble. The old four-story structure was demolished and, in 1968, replaced by the current library, designed by architect Joseph Stein.

A portrait of Silas Bronson, painted by Horace Johnson, may be seen in the lobby of the Library. Below it a bronze tablet designed by Dr. Joseph Anderson pays tribute to the man whose philanthropy gave Waterbury a public library designed "to encourage and sustain good order and sound morals".

