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PO Box 18337 • Cleveland Heights, Ohio 44118

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The Cleveland Heights Historical Society  
PO Box 18337  
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# View from The Overlook



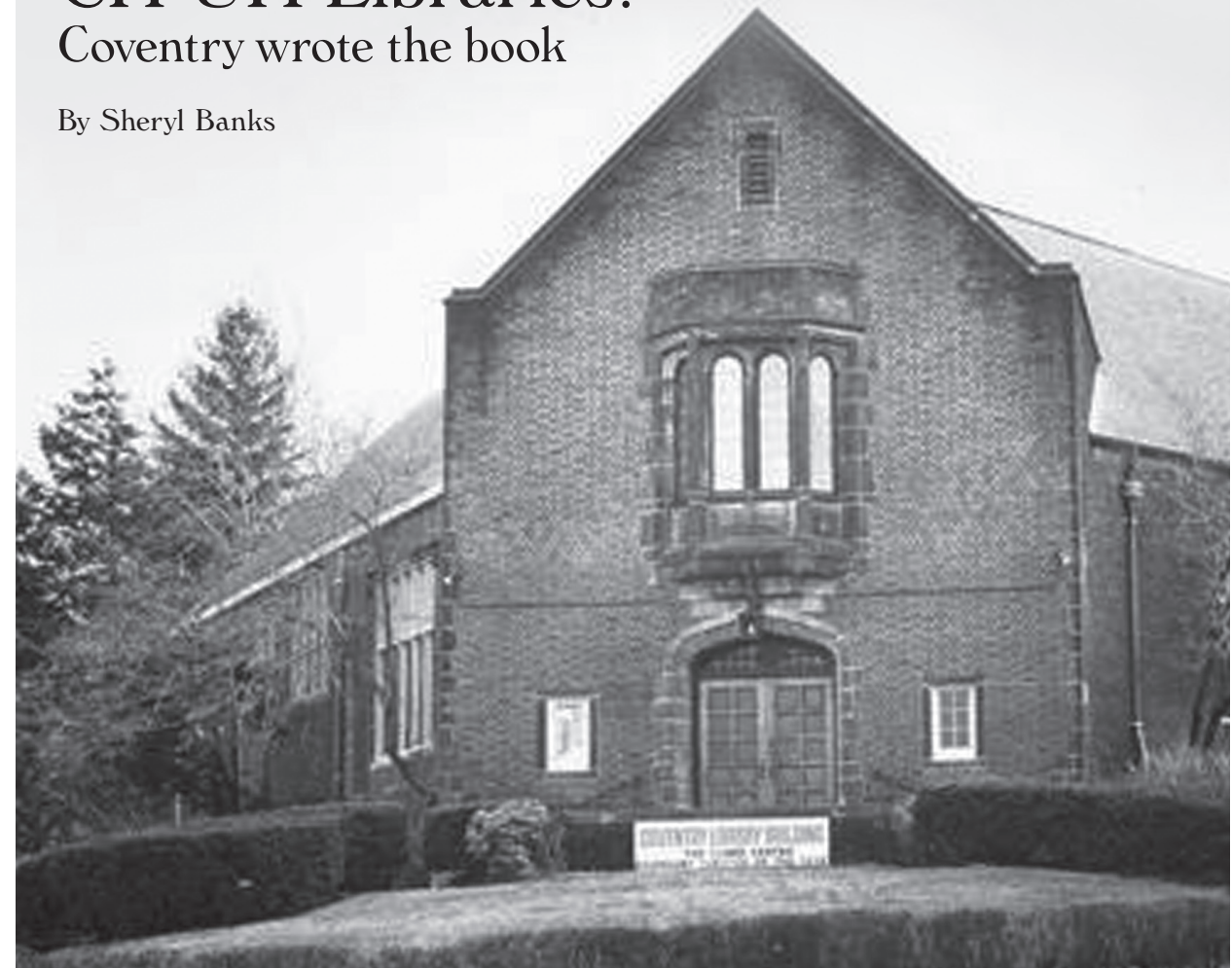
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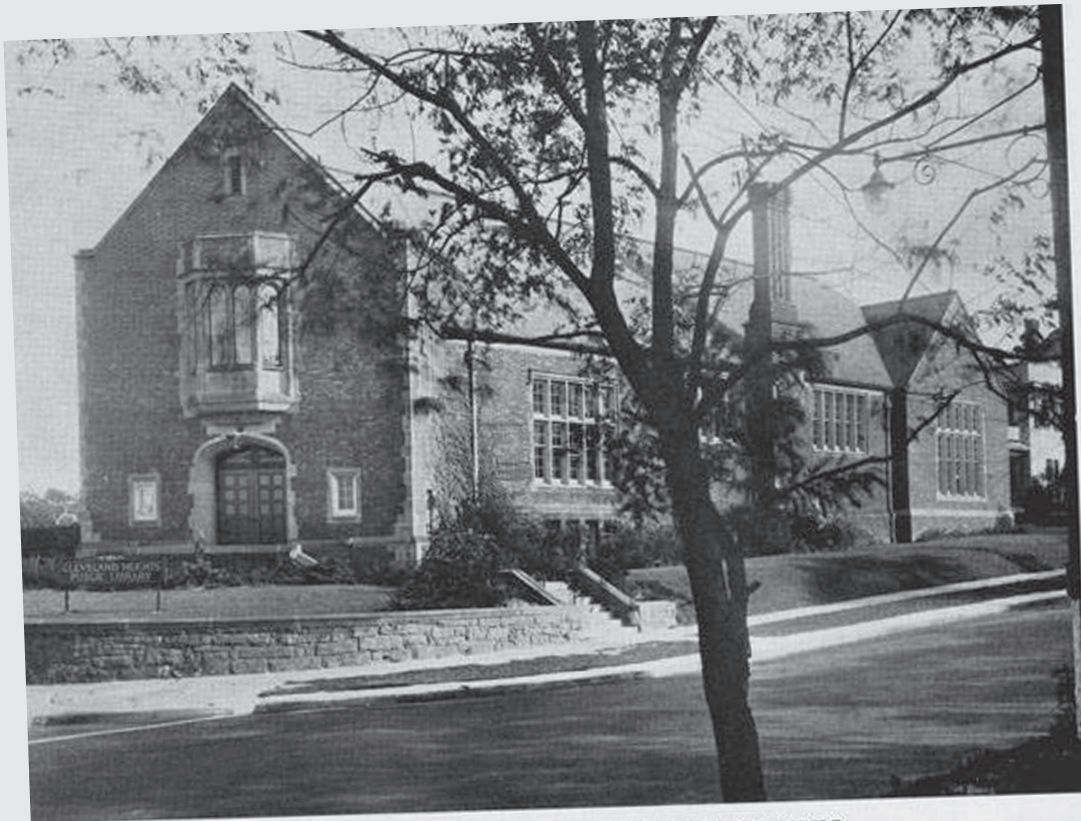
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## CH-UH Libraries? Coventry wrote the book

By Sheryl Banks





COVENTRY LIBRARY, CLEVELAND HEIGHTS, OHIO

W. Reagh, Inc., Builders

John H. Graham & Co., Architects

# CH-UH Libraries? Coventry wrote the book

By Sheryl Banks



The history of the Coventry Village branch of the Cleveland Heights-University Heights Public Library is, in a way, the history of the Heights library system itself. Coventry was the first location and the first library building in our suburb, and it remains the oldest of the system's four buildings.

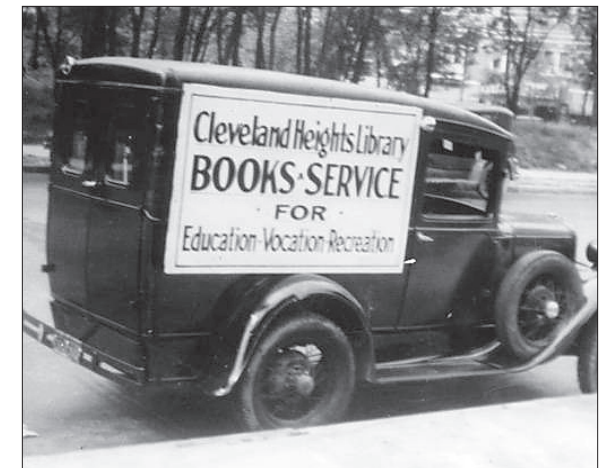
Planning for the library started a century ago, in 1915, when John Barden was elected to the Board of Education of what was then the Village of Cleveland Heights. Part of Barden's election platform was a promise to start a public library for the village. In 1916, Barden headed a committee that selected the first members of the future public library board, which was established that same year. The Board held its first meeting in 1917 but soon learned that there were no funds available to support a public library. It was not until 1921, the same year that Cleveland Heights became a city, that the Ohio Legislature approved a tax levy through the Cleveland Heights Board of Education to fund the new public library.

In the meantime, the library at Coventry School had begun lending books to teachers and children, and the school's collection became the first Cleveland Heights Public Library when funding was secured in 1921. The new library grew quickly, with branch locations opening at Roxboro and Fairfax schools and the original branch moving

to a larger space in 1924—a storefront at 1916 Lee Road where the Dance Studio is today (just north of Redwood Road).

It was at this time that the Cleveland Heights Library Board decided its growing library system needed permanent library buildings throughout the community. The first building to be completed was the Coventry branch, which was finished in 1926. Also in 1926, suburb-wide book circulation reached 316,473, the highest figure per borrower of any city of comparable size.

The new library system was clearly filling a community need and it finally had a permanent home at Coventry. And what a home it was, and and still is. Designed by John H. Graham & Co., Architects, which also designed Canterbury School



Public Library Bookmobile at the Coventry Library, late 1920s. Photo courtesy of Cleveland Memory, Cleveland State University, Department of Special Collections.

Cover: Exterior shot of Coventry, 1981. Photo by Kevin G. Reeves.

Left: The Coventry Village branch was the first building in the Cleveland Heights-University Heights Public Library System. Photo taken 1926.

# The Cleveland Heights Historical Society



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The Cleveland Heights Historical Society, founded in 1983, is a state-chartered, 501(c)(3), not-for-profit organization.

*Our Mission*  
The Cleveland Heights Historical Society is dedicated to preserving and promoting the diverse character and traditions of Cleveland Heights.

As a community-based historic organization, the Society encourages and facilitates greater knowledge, understanding and awareness of the heritage of Cleveland Heights.



and the Fairmount Presbyterian Church, the Coventry building was constructed in the English medieval vernacular tradition with a large fireplace, Arts and Crafts tile work, and medieval-style light fixtures. It served as the main library for 42 years, until 1968.

In 1961, the renamed Cleveland Heights-University Heights Library System had the second highest book circulation for a city of its size category in the United States. As the surrounding communities grew, the Library Board decided to expand what was then a small branch on Lee Road into the system's main library. It was finished in 1968, and Coventry became a branch.

By 1974, the Coventry building was nearly 50 years old and showing its age, and its status as a branch building was tenuous. The Board decided to sell the building to the Fairmount Center for Creative and Performing Arts, a non-profit arts organization that used the space to provide fine arts services to the Cleveland Heights-University Heights and East Cleveland school

systems and to run dance programs for Cuyahoga Community College and Lake Erie College. But the building ultimately remained a library branch. The Center leased two main-floor rooms back to the library so Coventry remained open, but in a smaller space with fewer hours.

Over the next few years, Coventry neighborhood residents grew frustrated with the limited services at the branch. A citizens group gathered more than 2,000 signatures on a petition in 1979 to convince the Library Board to buy back its building. However, the Library Board thought the building needed too much restoration work



*Customers crowd the circulation desk at the newly renovated building's grand opening in December 1981.*

and hoped instead to obtain federal Community Development Block Grant funding through the City to open a larger library in developer Lewis Zipkin's Coventry development across Euclid Heights Boulevard. But City Council would not agree to allocate CDBG monies to the library, and the Fairmount Center could no longer afford the building. Thus in 1980, the Library Board repurchased the Coventry building, and it once again was a full-fledged branch. Also in 1980, the Cleveland Heights Landmark Commission designated the Coventry Library a Cleveland Heights Landmark.

With the building back in the library's possession, a much-needed renovation was undertaken. The facility reopened in 1981 with



*Photo taken from the top of the Heights Art Theater in 1921. Observe the vacant land at upper right where Coventry Library would soon be built. Also notable is the temporary classroom building behind the school*

an updated interior and a facelift to its signature, landmark-worthy exterior. Over the past 20 years, the system has worked hard to take good care of the building, including remodeling it in 1995, renovating the AV area and staff office in 2005, and replacing its windows with more energy-efficient models in 2013—all while honoring the integrity of the historic building.

Although it was no longer owned by an arts organization, the Coventry branch still offered opportunities for the community to experience,

and participate in, the arts in a wide variety of ways. The Pottery Cooperative of the Heights Guild of Artists and Artisans (later renamed Clay Works) purchased ceramic studio equipment, including a kiln, from the Fairmount Center and continued to serve as a pottery-making center in the building's basement, sometimes offering free classes for library customers. Over the years, the branch also has been home to the poetry and jazz program Nia Coffeehouse, a monthly ukulele jam that continues to this day, and, most recently, monthly concerts by students from the Cleveland Institute of Music. The branch is also home to a large collection of books by local authors—a collection supported by the Cedar-Coventry Author Series, a partnership with local bookstores Macs Backs on Coventry and

Appletree Books that brings in local authors for readings and book signings.

In addition to its arts-related offerings, Coventry branch began in 1988 to offer special services to the deaf community with monthly programs such as the Deaf Film Series and Deaf Gatherings. The Library also offers American Sign Language classes several times each year and has installed a video relay phone for deaf and hard-of-hearing customers. In 1998, the branch received a

Community Vision Award from Heights Community Congress for its deaf awareness programs.

And like the neighborhood it overlooks, the Coventry branch is known for offering programs that are a little funky, a little edgy, and not afraid to be a little different. A good example is the Step Out of Time Series, a monthly program dedicated to alternative health and spiritual practices, including meditation, yoga, feng shui and other disciplines. There are also regular Tai Chi classes

*continued*



that attract a loyal following, and a new seed lending library kicked off in spring 2014.

In 2014, the board decided to close the Coventry branch on Fridays in order to open the extremely busy University Heights branch on Sundays. A public survey in 2013 had indicated that residents of both Cleveland Heights and University Heights wanted Sunday hours back at the branches; state funding cuts in 2009 had forced all but the Lee Road branch to close on those days.

The Friday closing met with opposition from Coventry Village residents, who circulated a petition asking that the hours be reinstated. The residents presented the signatures to the Board at its February 2014 meeting, and also read statements about the importance of the Coventry branch to the neighborhood's businesses and residents. The Board reassured the residents that the Coventry branch would not be closing, and that the new hours would be examined at the end of 2014 to see if the change in hours had been successful for the system overall and perhaps become permanent.

Despite the Friday closing, the future of the Coventry branch of the Cleveland Heights-University Heights Public Library is bright. As it approaches its centennial, the system is looking for ways to keep improving the branch to ensure its continued role as a vibrant, vital part of the community and the library system.

*Cleveland Heights Public Library adult reference and reading room at the Coventry Village branch, circa 1928.*

*Sheryl Banks lives in Cleveland Heights with her husband and son. She not only works for Heights Libraries – her title is Heights Libraries Marketing and Community Relations Manager – but is a frequent customer. She loves Cleveland Heights' history, culture, and architecture.*

