

# The History of the Oxford County Library

## A Timeline

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This timeline is a general history of the Oxford County Library. It is based partly on information presented in [\*Oxford County Library: A Brief History\*](#), published locally in 1972 by the Oxford County Library and researched and written by librarian Louise Krompart. It includes, where possible, information post-1972 plus information about the origins and development of county library systems in Ontario.\*

This timeline is a work in progress. Later iterations will correct any errors, fill gaps, and may eventually include separate, more detailed histories of each branch library.

Unless otherwise noted, all images that appear in this booklet are from the Oxford County Library's collections.

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**Fall 2023**

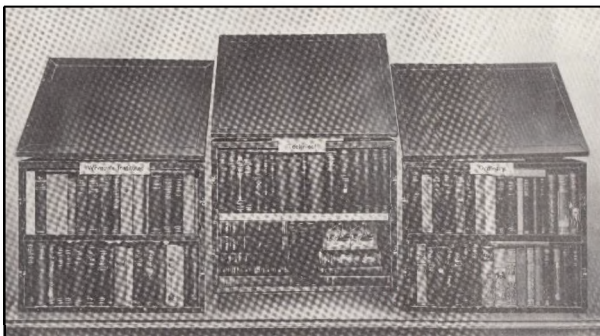


Hilda Mason (centre), who served as Librarian of the Tillsonburg Public Library from 1949 until 1970. *Photo courtesy of the Mason family and Matt Scholtz.*

## Introduction

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, life in rural Ontario was predominantly agricultural. Yet demand for library service existed, even in the smallest of villages and hamlets. Before county library associations began to form in Ontario in the 1930s, however, traveling libraries served much of this demand, first by horse and then later by automobile. But even then, travelling libraries did not reach all locations.

By the 1910s, advocates for county and even regional library models existed in Ontario but the province's Department of Education, which was responsible for Ontario's public libraries at the time, was slow to respond. Meanwhile, across the border in New York, the state had passed laws as early as 1912 to allow county library associations to form. Successful examples of county libraries also existed in California and Indiana, among other American states, as well as in parts of England; but no such examples yet existed in Canada.



A traveling library, ca. 1900. *Photo from the Inspector of Public Libraries (Ontario) Report for 1910. Western Libraries collections, public domain.*

Although the current Oxford County Library system did not exist until 1965, this timeline begins earlier and includes information about the current system's two predecessors, the Oxford County Library Association (1936-48) and the Oxford County Library Cooperative (1948-64).

\* We recently found in our archives evidence that someone (possibly Mary Jane Webb, the OCL's Chief Librarian at the time) updated Krompart's work in 1985, possibly with the intention to publish an updated version of the Krompart's 1972 work. Only the final manuscript of this updated version survives, however.



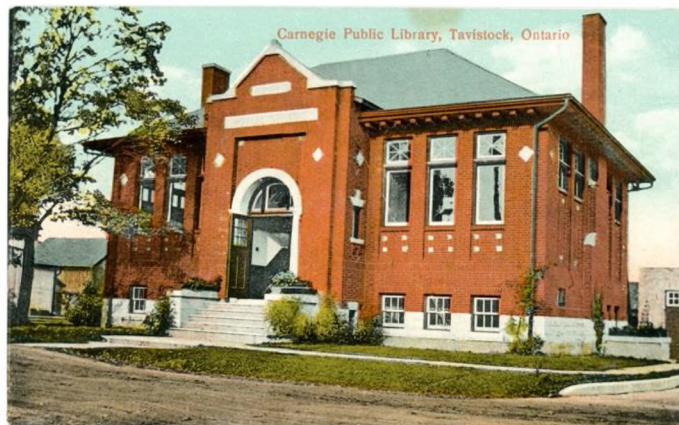
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## Pre-History (1910 to 1964)

This section documents events from the origins of county library systems in Ontario up to formation and dissolution of the current Oxford County Library's two predecessors, the Oxford County Library Association (1936-47) and the Oxford County Library Cooperative (1948-64).

### 1910-17

Around 1900, Scottish-born American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie begins the international phase of his library building program, a program responsible for the construction of over 2,500 library buildings around the world. Virtually all historians of public libraries agree that Carnegie's program was the single largest boost to the development of modern public libraries in North America in the last century. In fact, of the 125 Carnegie libraries built in Canada then, most were in Ontario. And of these, Oxford County claimed five: the libraries of Woodstock (opened in 1909), Ingersoll (1910), Norwich (1915), Tillsonburg (1915), and Tavistock (1917). A sixth, which was planned for Otterville and was to serve South Norwich township, was never built. In later decades, the Ingersoll, Norwich, and Tavistock Carnegie buildings would serve as branch libraries of the present-day Oxford County Library system, established in 1965.



Vintage postcard images of the (clockwise from top-left) Ingersoll, Norwich, Tillsonburg, and Tavistock Carnegie libraries.

### 1912

W. H. Arison, Board Chairman of the Niagara Falls (Ontario) Public Library, addresses the Niagara Institute held in Beamsville. His paper, titled "Library Extension on County Lines", argues for the passing of legislation in Ontario that will allow county libraries to form. "The central library at the county seat owns all the books," Arison writes, describing the basic service model, "branches or deposit stations are established in various parts of the county,



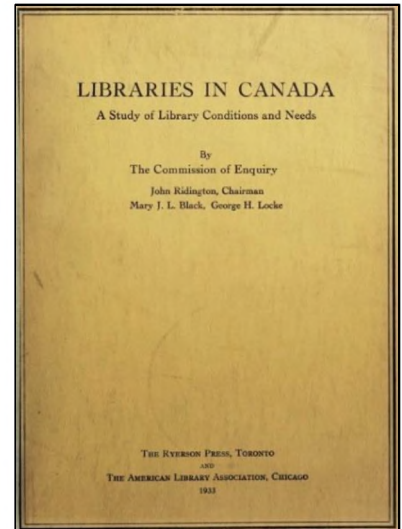
through which books reach the people.” The goals of a county library are not much different than a municipal one, Arison claims, except that a county library reaches the information poor more effectively in rural locations. “The placing of books within convenient reach of those who are remote from the more favoured localities where graded schools, supplemented by a Carnegie Library whose shelves are well stocked with choice fiction—and a few reference books—serves to make culture and leaning abound” (see Appendix V of the *Report of the Minister of Education, Province of Ontario, for the Year 1912*, p. 685).

### 1932

Organized by Dorothy Carlisle of the Sarnia Public Library, the Lambton County Library Association, Ontario’s first such organization, forms with fourteen member libraries. Over the next several years, similar associations will form in Middlesex County (October 1934) and Elgin County (spring 1936).

### 1933

Toronto’s Ryerson Press and the American Library Association in Chicago co-publish the landmark *Libraries in Canada: A Study of Library Conditions and Needs*, the result of a commission chaired by John Ridington, Librarian of the University of British Columbia, with assistance from Mary J. L. Black and George Locke of the Toronto Public Library. Among other conclusions, the report claims that library service in the province’s smallest centers is often hampered by meager budgets and, consequently, poor collections. “The next forward step in library work in Ontario,” the report claims, “is to make such plans as will render possible the grouping of libraries, either in counties or in districts, to centralize book selection and distribute efforts in such a way that all living in any district, whether in an organized municipality or not, may have the advantage of all the books in that county or district” (pp. 53-54).



Title page from the *Libraries in Canada* report, 1933. Its findings encouraged the formation of county library associations in Canada. *Public domain.*

### 1935

In February, Brant County announces a plan to form a county library association. “[R]ural libraries are grouped together into one association, having the distributing centre for books usually in the county town,” explains the *Brantford Expositor* (Feb 6, 1935). “Each rural library pays in a fixed amount... to the common fund with which the books selected are purchased. This enables a wide range of books to be purchased which is not possible to a rural library operating as a single unit, the books being changed and redistributed every few months and thus affording many of the most up-to-date publications for county readers.”

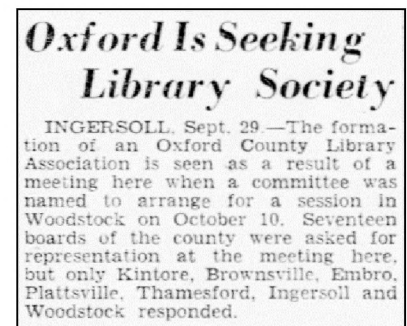
### 1936

In February, Richard E. Crouch, Chief Librarian of the London Public Library at the time, delivers a presentation in Thamesford about the merits of forming county library associations. His paper is titled “County Library Associations and How One Has Worked in Middlesex County”.

After a September meeting held in Ingersoll, the Oxford County Library Association forms. It is the first of two predecessors of the current Oxford County Library. Of the seventeen public libraries in the county at the time, seven send representatives to this meeting: Kintore, Brownsville, Embro, Plattsville, Thamesford, Ingersoll, and Woodstock. Each member library agrees to pay a fixed, annual fee to fund a shared collection of books. Blythe Terryberry of the Woodstock Public Library and Betty Crawford of the Ingersoll Public Library take charge of operations, purchasing and distributing books to member libraries. By the end of the year, libraries in Hickson, Mount Elgin, Norwich, and Princeton join the new Association.



Headline from the Ingersoll *Chronicle* heralding the formation of the Oxford County Library Association, 1936.



The *Windsor Star* announces formation of the Oxford County Library Association, September 29, 1936.





Two views of downtown Ingersoll, ca. 1930s: (left) looking southeast down Thames Street towards King Street; and (right) looking southwest down King Street from the intersection at Thames.

### 1937

Burgessville's library joins the Oxford County Library Association. By the end of the decade, county library associations operate in Brant, Elgin, Lambton, Middlesex, Oxford, and Simcoe counties. Discussions continue about forming similar associations in Essex and Huron counties.

### 1947

Ontario's *Public Libraries Amendment Act 1947* passes, Section 5 of which redefines the legal structure of county-level services and requires associations to reestablish as "cooperatives". Under this new model, member libraries remain independent but county councils can appoint county-level boards to supplement municipal governance. By the end of the year, the Oxford County Library Association formally dissolves.

### 1948

In April, the newly established Oxford County Library Cooperative holds its inaugural meeting in Ingersoll. R. C. Brogden of Ingersoll serves as Chairman and Betty Crawford of Ingersoll serves as the Secretary-Treasurer. The Cooperative is one of eleven such county library organizations in Ontario.

### 1949

Louise Krompart becomes administrator of the newly formed Oxford County Library Cooperative, and the organization forms its headquarters inside the Oxford County Court House in Woodstock. The headquarters processes library materials then circulates them by car among the Cooperative's member libraries. By the end of the year, Otterville joins the Cooperative.

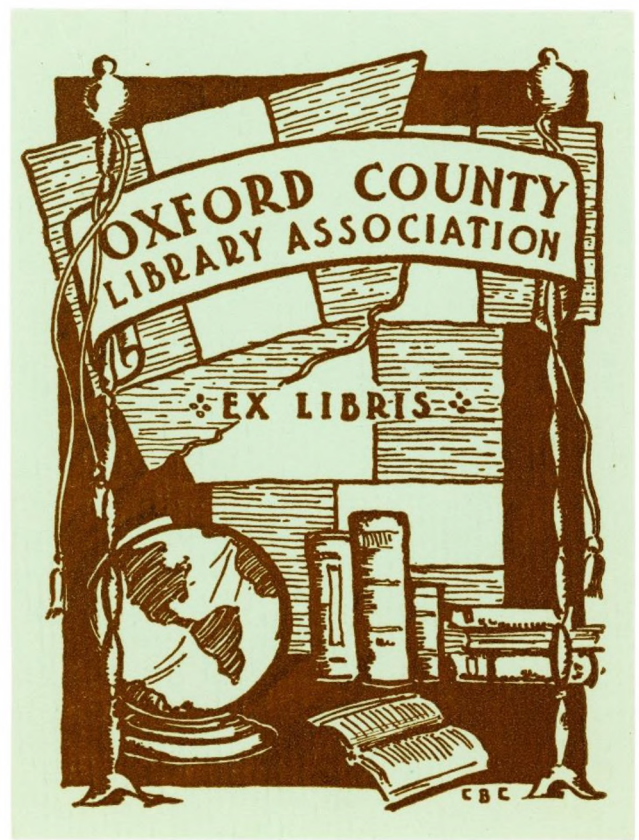
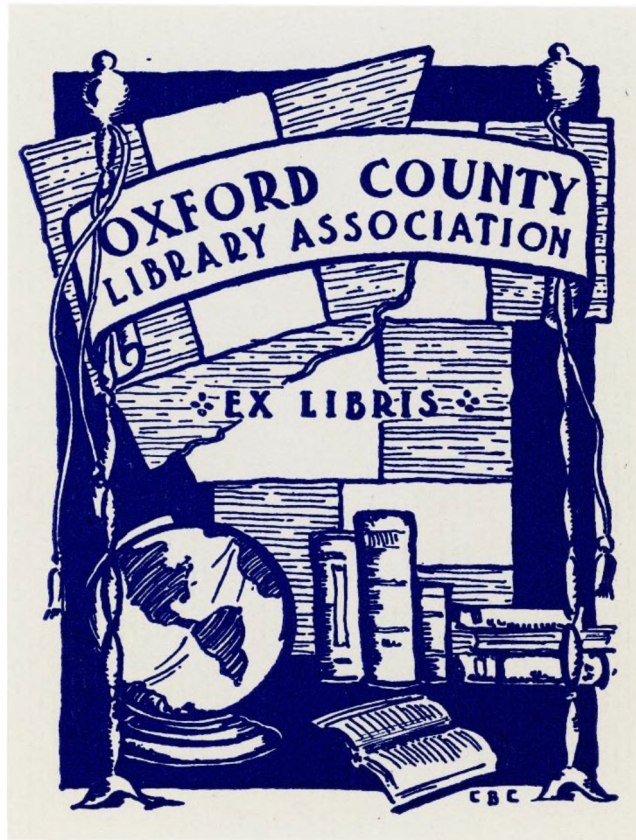
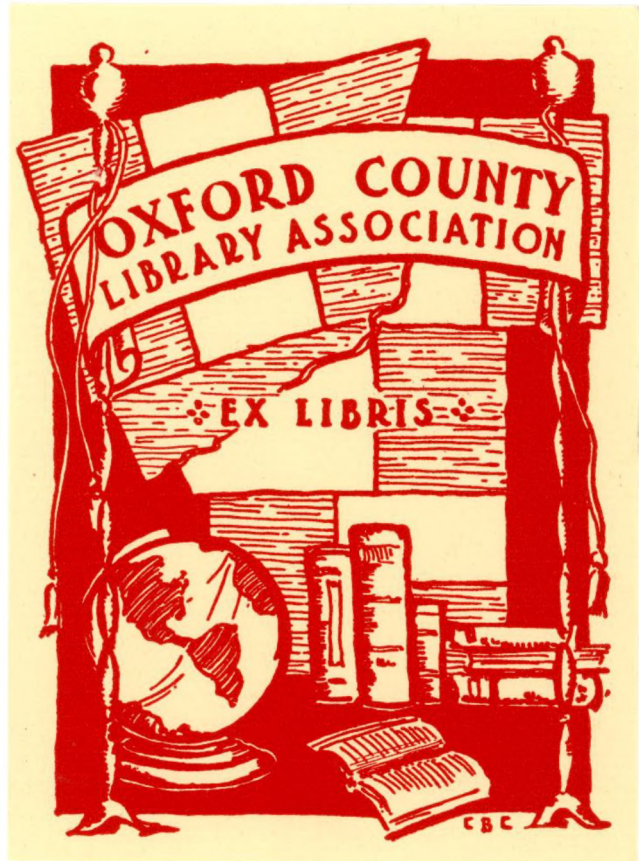
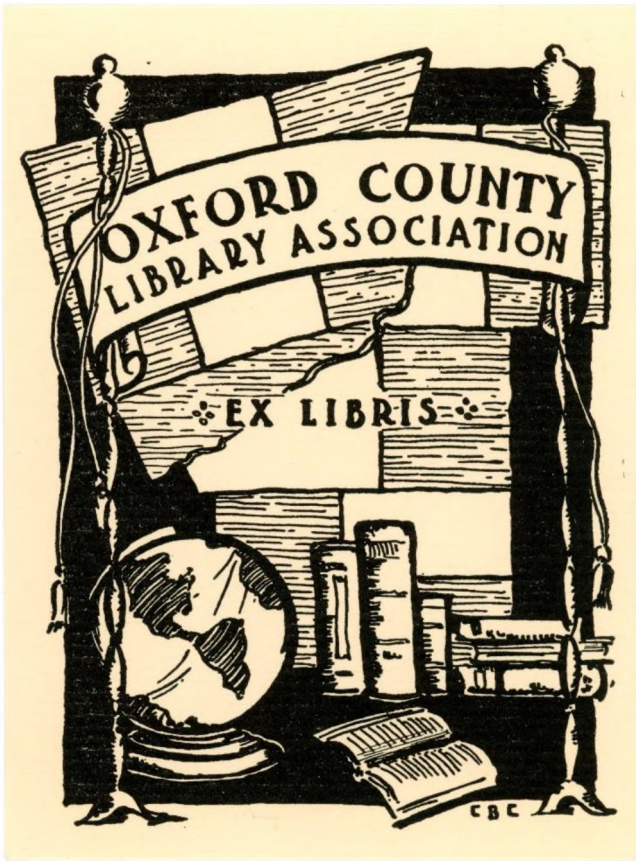
### 1953

The Oxford County Library Cooperative expands its quarters and purchases its first bookmobile—a vehicle that distributes books to parts of county too remote to reach existing library branches.

### 1959

Ontario passes the *Public Libraries Amendment Act*, its first law permitting free library systems to form and operate at county-level under a single board. Under this new model, a county requires at least seventy-five percent of its municipalities (changed to fifty percent in 1962) to permit a free county library, although non-member municipalities may exist and operate as independent public libraries if they choose. The Act also allows existing county cooperatives to continue under the former model. Adoption of the new model is slow, however; the first county-level public library system (Middlesex County) established under this new law, does not form until 1962.





Four bookplates designed and sent to the Oxford County Library Association in February 1938 by the London Printing & Lithographing Co. of London, Ontario. "Please select the one that you desire to use and return it to us," requested the Company. It is not known which colour(s) the Association eventually chose.



# WESTERN ONTARIO

## HISTORICAL NOTES

THE PROPERTY OF  
NORWICH  
PUBLIC LIBRARY

*Oxford County File  
Vertical File*

Issued quarterly by the Lawson Memorial Library,  
University of Western Ontario, for the promotion  
of local historical research and writing.

Vol. V

March, 1947

No. 1



The Woodstock Public Library

Headquarters of the Oxford County Library Association

(Illustration by courtesy of the Woodstock Sentinel-Review.)

The cover of the February 1947 issue of *Western Ontario Historical Notes*, published by the Lawson Memorial Library of the University of Western Ontario, shows the location of the Oxford County Library Association's headquarters, a room in the Woodstock Carnegie Library. Reformed in 1948 as the Oxford County Library Cooperative, it would later move to rooms in the nearby Woodstock courthouse.



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## Oxford County Library (1965 to present)

### 1965

The Oxford County Library Cooperative dissolves and the present-day Oxford County Library system forms. Louise Krompart serves as its inaugural Chief Librarian. Among the new system's earliest branches are Beachville, Brownsville, Embro, Hickson, Kintore, Norwich, Otterville, Plattsville, Tavistock, and Thamesford.

### 1967

The Oxford County Library opens new branches at Innerkip and East Oxford plus a new central facility in Woodstock. Named Oxford Library Headquarters, the new building at 93 Graham Street is a Centennial project and contains administrative offices plus as a circulating library for the public. The library headquarters' former space in the county courthouse in Woodstock is later occupied by the Public Works Department.

### 1969

The Ingersoll Public Library, then supervised by Betty Crawford, becomes a branch of the Oxford County Library system. A new branch facility opens in Drumbo; this library building is the first ever owned by the Oxford County Library.

### 1974

Louise Krompart retires and Mary Jane Webb (later Gamble) becomes Chief Librarian of the Oxford County Library.

### 1975

The Foldens Branch opens in April.

### 1978

Oxford Library Headquarters implements a teleprinter machine, making (according to the OCL's 1978 *Annual Report*) "communications amongst all libraries of the system more precise and workable, especially in the interlibrary loan and reference division[s]."

### 1985-88

Now comprising 19 branches throughout the county plus a headquarters in Woodstock, the Oxford County Library joins the Ontario Library Cooperative Automation Program. By fall 1986, the library is barcoding its materials and creating an electronic database of its collections.

### 1986

With inter-branch book lending increasing, the library replaces its old mail bag system of inter-branch delivery with motorized delivery, a method that continues today.

### 1988

After 24 years of service (13 as Chief Librarian), Mary Jane Gamble retires on September 1<sup>st</sup>. Sam Coghlan joins the OCL as its new Chief Librarian.

### 1989

The OCL receives a grant from the Ontario Ministry of Culture and Communications to hire a writer-in-residence, poet Christopher Dewdney. His appointment is part of the broader Writers-in-Libraries Program, established in 1986.





Completed in 1967 as a Centennial project, the former Oxford County Library Headquarters building still stands at 93 Graham Street in Woodstock. It housed library administration plus a small circulating collection until 1997. Drill holes and other scars on the building's front reveal the sign that once was: "Oxford County Library". Today, this building houses Southwest Public Health. *Photo taken in July 2022.*



An interior view of the former Oxford County Library Headquarters building, taken in 1993. In the foreground sits then-Chief Librarian Sam Coghlan, cataloging materials using one of the library's computers.





A glimpse of two former branches: (left) the interior of the former Foldens Branch in 1993; and (right) the interior of the Ingersoll Branch's former Carnegie building on Charles Street East, a photo taken shortly before it closed.

## 1990

The Oxford County Library celebrates its 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. Ingersoll celebrates one hundred years of free library service and holds centenary celebrations at the branch in September.

## 1992

To address new strategic planning standards, and with substantial input from the Oxford County Library, the Southern Ontario Library Service (SOLS) publishes *Focus on the Future*, a community needs-based assessment manual for county and other rural libraries to use when planning their services and programs.

## 1993

The Foldens Branch permanently closes.

## 1996

After more than 85 years of service as a library, Ingersoll's Carnegie building at 1 Charles Street East closes. The branch relocates to a new facility at 130 Oxford Street, shared with the town of Ingersoll, and opens to the public in October.

## 1997

Oxford Library Headquarters at 93 Graham Street in Woodstock permanently closes in February and moves its administrative offices to the basement of the Ingersoll Town Centre. (The former library building on Graham Street now houses Southwest Public Health.)

## 2003

In January, at the Ontario Library Association conference in Toronto, the Ontario Ministry of Culture presents the Oxford County Library with its prestigious Minister's Award for Innovation. The award recognizes the OCL's participation in the "Service Canada" pilot project, a 27-month federally-funded program (undertaken in partnership with Human Resources Development Canada) that offered federal government information via service points in libraries and other community access centres.

## 2004

In June, Chief Librarian Sam Coghlan leaves the Oxford County Library to become CEO of the Stratford Public Library.





The Beachville Branch closed in 2006. Today, its sign still hangs outside the library's former entrance (above, left), the building now used for private business. In 2013, the Tillsonburg Public Library (above, right) joined the Oxford County system as its newest—and second largest—branch.

## 2005

Five branches of the Oxford County Library close permanently in June: Beachville, Drumbo, Hickson, Kintore, and Oxford Centre.

## 2006

Formerly the Branch Services Librarian, Lisa Miettinen becomes CEO of the Oxford County Library. In Norwich, after many decades of service as a library, the Carnegie building at 21 Stover Street closes. The Norwich branch reopens in a new facility at 10 Tidey Street.

## 2009

In November, Oxford Library Headquarters relocates from the basement of the Ingersoll branch to the newly constructed Oxford County Administration Building at Reeve and Peel streets in Woodstock.

## 2010

In August, the OCL closes the Tavistock Carnegie building and relocates its Tavistock branch to the ground floor of the former Oxford Hotel building at 40 Woodstock Street South.

## 2013

On January 1<sup>st</sup>, Tillsonburg joins the Oxford County Library system. Branch operations relocate temporarily to a unit at the Tillsonburg Town Centre mall while the former Tillsonburg Public Library building on Broadway Street undergoes substantial renovation. The revamped building reopens later in the year as the Tillsonburg Branch of the Oxford County Library.

## 2020

In response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the Oxford County Library temporarily closes all its branches effective March 14<sup>th</sup>. In coming months, and following strict guidelines implemented by provincial and federal authorities, the library's larger branches resume service but follow reduced hours and offer curbside service only. Some library programs resume but run virtually. By fall, some branches reopen their buildings to the public but masking and social distancing restrictions remain in effect.

## 2021

Due to rising numbers of COVID infections across the region, the library begins to restrict service again in the early months of the year, reverting to curbside-only service in April. By July, most branches reopen their buildings to the public again, although program delivery continues to be virtual.



## **2022**

After a month of curbside-only service (January), the library gradually reopens to the public again. By March, and still following public health guidelines carefully, the library reintroduces in person programming for the first time in two years. CEO Lisa Miettinen retires at the end of March. In May, the library board hires Lisa Marie Williams to serve as the library's new CEO.

## **2023**

In May, the Oxford County Library launches a bookmobile service called "Ox on the Run". Staffed by two full-time clerks and using a former ambulance as its vehicle, the "Ox on the Run" bookmobile offers reading materials, basic circulation and tech services, and selected programming.