



The Atwater Library,  
Westmount's other library

## Description

# The venerable institution will soon celebrate 189 years of serving the community

By **Patricia Dumais**

Few communities can boast two exceptional libraries and Westmount has the great fortune of being one of them. Everyone knows the Westmount Public Library in Westmount Park, but did you know that the Atwater Library, aka the Atwater, is also a Westmount institution? Situated on Atwater Avenue, right by the city's eastern border with the Ville-Marie borough, the Library's elegant heritage building, classified as a National Historic Site, welcomes visitors to our city.

As a long time resident of Westmount, I had often walked by but must confess that I only fairly recently discovered the Atwater Library. That was about ten years ago when I decided to take a computer class and was delighted to learn that the library offered the course I needed to take, at a very reasonable rate. This is when I realized that the Atwater is much more than a simple library – it is also a digital learning centre and a meeting place for all sorts of community-oriented activities. Since then, I have attended numerous talks and information sessions on a wide variety of topics.

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The Atwater Library traces its origins back to 1828, when the first mechanics' institute in continental British North America was formed in Montreal by some prominent citizens who saw a need to educate workers for the emerging industries of the growing city. Today, with its official name, Atwater Library and Computer Centre, it is the sole survivor of the many mechanics' institutes established in Canada in the 19th century but continues to serve the needs of the community with its extensive educational, cultural and social program.

The Library counts over 40,000 items, mostly English language books, as well as DVDs, eBooks and audio books. It even offers a home delivery service for downtown residents with a loss of mobility. The Computer Centre offers for-fee computer courses and digital device workshops as well as public access to computer stations and free WIFI.

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Last year the Atwater Library hosted almost 100 English-language educational and cultural events, including activities that celebrate English-language writers. With Autorité des marchés financiers (AMF) funding, it offered a series of workshops and information sessions on financial planning for retirees and new parents.

The Library practices community outreach by way of a variety of special activities including, this year, Canada 150 video and oral history projects. It also now offers the capacity to display visual arts such as the recent Scottish Diaspora Tapestry exhibition.

A registered charity with the mission to “foster learning and contribute to the development of the Montreal community” the Atwater Library attracts over 100,000 user-visits a year from all over the greater Montreal area.

‘...the library is a favourite stop for seniors, whether to attend an interesting talk or get tips on how to use a digital device – the friendly and patient volunteers are there to help.’





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Walking by the other day around 10 am, which is the opening time of the Library, I noticed a line up of people waiting to enter the building. I chatted with an elderly gentleman who told me that the library was a “second home” where he could relax and read the papers. In fact, the library is a favourite stop for seniors, whether to attend an interesting talk or get tips on how to use a digital device – the friendly and patient volunteers are there to help.

The Library is without an endowment fund and depends primarily on generous private donors, such as the George Hogg Family Foundation and the Zeller Family Foundation, as well as on volunteer service for its vitality. “Running on a tight budget of \$ 578,000 (in 2016), we have a small staff of nine full-time-equivalent employees and count on our ‘family’ of over 175 dedicated volunteers to keep the place going,” says Director Lynn Verge. “One of our volunteers, a dynamic woman in her mid-80s from Chateauguay, has been with us for 30 years!”

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As well, the Library receives federal government project grants and municipal funding from Westmount and Montreal. Speaking of projects, being an independent not for profit institution has its advantages. “We can fast-track projects as there is little red tape to slow things down,” says Verge. A case in point is the popular monthly Alzheimer Café. “Former City Councillor Margaret Lefebvre had suggested an idea from Europe for ongoing casual meetings for those suffering from Alzheimer’s or other dementias, and their caregivers, to enable socializing and discussion about the aspects of life with dementia”, explains Verge. “We ran with the idea and got the Alzheimer Society of Montreal involved. It was an immediate success and they then expanded on the idea with a network of Cafés. We are about to celebrate our Café’s fifth anniversary!”

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The maintenance of the heritage building built in 1919 is a

prime preoccupation according to Verge, “In the past five years we have done a number of necessary improvements, such as adding a sprinkler system and other code-compliance alterations, and we installed new and expanded washrooms, upgraded our versatile auditorium and common areas. And we’re now partway through restoring our windows. Central air conditioning would be desirable. But what we really wish for is to make the building more accessible for the disabled as well as our aging population and this would mean installing an elevator,



a very costly proposition.”

The new Square Children’s condo development and the city of Westmount’s South-East Revitalisation project will bring major changes to the area. “We are watching these developments closely”, says Verge, “as the construction will definitely impact our building and our quality of life. But at the same time we remain optimistic that the projects will bring new members to our door.”

To find out more about the Atwater Library and Computer Centre and its program visit [atwaterlibrary.ca](http://atwaterlibrary.ca)



## I Party

The **2017 Atwater Library benefit event** takes place on

**Wednesday, November 1** at 6 pm in the beautiful heritage building located at 1200 Atwater, Westmount.

As in previous years, the party will include a fabulous silent auction and tasty smoked meat. Global Montreal anchor/reporter **Amanda Jelowicki** will be the MC with musical entertainment provided by the talented **Dave Turner Jazz Trio**.

This year’s Guest of Honour is Westmounter **Michael St. B. Harrison**, in recognition of his generous and effective community service as a volunteer, advocate and donor, as well as his important contributions to the economy of Montreal.

Tickets priced at \$150 are now available online through [CanadaHelps](http://CanadaHelps) (\$125 tax receipt). For more information, please email [tmayhew@atwaterlibrary.ca](mailto:tmayhew@atwaterlibrary.ca)

*Feature image: Patricia Dumais*

*All other images: Frédéric Ryan- instagram (@freedomtl)*

*Read also: [Atwater Library honours David Angus](#)*



**Patricia Dumais**, artistic director, award-winning graphic designer specialized in brand design is co-founder of Visionnaires, publishers of Westmount Magazine. Patricia develops visual concepts and ensures that all deliverables follow our publication's standards and reflect the editorial voice. You can connect with Patricia on [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#) and [Pinterest](#). or by email at [pdumais@westmountmag.ca](mailto:pdumais@westmountmag.ca).

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### Date Created

October 2017