

History of Public Libraries

Alexandria

- The Alexandrian library was not the first library in the world, not even in the Western world, but it is the one most remembered.
- The library was founded by Ptolemy I as an attempt to collect everything that had been written at the time.
- In addition to collecting (sometimes by unscrupulous means), the library published and translated new materials in many languages.
- The destruction of the library is often attributed to a fire in 48 B.C. This was merely the first step in its decline. As a matter of fact, much of the collection was restored when Marc Antony gave Cleopatra the contents of the Pergamon library.
- The Alexandrian library languished during the anti-intellectualism of Ptolemy VIII, and was finally destroyed by invasions of Christians and Muslims who burned most of the remaining collection on religious grounds.

Gutenberg

- Movable type was used long before Gutenberg, as early as the 11th century in China and Korea, but he developed a practical combination of movable metal type and the wine press in 1452.
- This revolution allowed for fast, inexpensive production of high-quality books. It also spurred publication of books (especially Bibles) in common languages rather than Latin.
- The Catholic practice of selling papal indulgences would not have been practical without the printing press. Martin Luther's attacks on the practice and the corruption it fostered were also dependent on the rapid printing of tracts and pamphlets. The printing press can be said to have spurred the Protestant Reformation.
- Outside of the churches, the great minds of the Humanist Enlightenment used the printing press to good effect, assembling many large private libraries and recovering "lost" manuscripts that had been squirreled away during the Dark Ages.
- Much editing and creation of definitive editions of classic works happened during this time, as it was possible to collect many versions of a text and compare them.
- In 1627 a French librarian named Naudé published probably the first book on the creation and maintenance of libraries: *Advis pour Dresser une Bibliothèque* or *Recommendations on the Establishment of a Library*.
- In 1630 the first modern encyclopedia was published in Switzerland. By 1700 printed books became standardized with a title page, illustrations, a table of contents and often an index.

Early “Public” Libraries

- The first public library in Rome was established by Asinius Pollio between 39 and 27 B.C. By 350 A.D. at least 28 public libraries existed in Rome, open to any person, slave or free, who could read.
- Libraries that were referred to as “public” existed in Europe starting in the 15th century. They were actually established for the specialized use of a select clientele from certain classes or professions. Another common practice during that time was book rental, either by booksellers, or as a sideline business for other kinds of merchants.
- Around 1700, the Anglican Reverend Thomas Bray established many public libraries in parishes throughout North America, but these had highly selected collections of mostly religious works.
- In 1730, Benjamin Franklin convinced a group of his friends to form a subscription library. They pooled their existing collections, paid a fee to buy other works and periodicals, and set it up for public use. However, only subscribers could take items out of the library. Others had to use them on the premises. His model was the basis for many subscription libraries both in America and abroad.

Boston

- The first tax-supported public library in the United States was established in Peterborough, New Hampshire, in 1833.
- However, the Boston Public Library, founded in 1854, is usually considered the first modern public library in America for two reasons. It was entirely tax-supported, and the founders felt that it was essential to the continued health and growth of the city of Boston.
- The library was conceived as an extension of the free public schools, a place where graduates and dropouts could go to continue their education on their own.
- Additional purposes:
 - To produce educated and informed voters
 - To provide an alternative entertainment to the brothels and drinking houses
 - To allow tradesmen to upgrade their skills
- Almost from the first, women used the library more than men, and many became strong advocates for libraries, supporting those that existed and founding others in rural and suburban areas.

Melvil Dewey

- Dewey was an odd and fascinating person, driven to efficiency and organization in all things.
- One of the most popular stories about him has him classifying everything in his mother’s pantry at an early age.

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- His interest in economy and spelling reform led him to drop the letters “le” from his first name when he entered college. Later on, he had his last name legally changed to Dui.
- Existing organization systems had classified catalogs, but books were assigned a fixed locator number based on their position on the shelf. When books were moved, this created enormous renumbering problems.
- Dewey created a unified “relative” system, so that it didn’t matter where books were as long as they were all in order. He published the first edition of Decimal Classification in 1876. This work was the basis for the Dewey Decimal System which is a standard for classifying information that is widely used in libraries today.
- It is often said that Dewey singlehandedly created professional librarianship in America. In 1876 he both founded the American Library Association and launched *Library Journal*. He also started the first school of “library economy” at Columbia University in 1887.

Andrew Carnegie

- Carnegie was the owner of U.S. Steel Corporation and the embodiment of the American “rags to riches” ideal. He started with very little and grew to be very wealthy. Later in life, he became a great philanthropist, and libraries were the most significant benefactors.
- One of his earliest successes involved libraries. When he was a young working boy, a library was built in the town where he lived. He campaigned to have it opened to workers as well as apprentices.
- When he began donating to libraries, he founded them wholly on his own funds, but he quickly established a pattern. He would draw up a contract with the town or city such that he would give the money for the building and initial collection, but the town must levy a tax to support it after that.
- In all, Carnegie money founded 2,509 libraries in the English-speaking world, at a cost of \$56 million.

Oklahoma

- From 1890 to 1919 women’s federated study clubs were active in laying the groundwork for Oklahoma’s public libraries. Club women sponsored the only traveling library service in the state, sponsored free libraries for their towns, worked to convert them to tax-supported institutions, and pushed to establish a state library agency.
- The Oklahoma Library Association was organized with the first meeting held on May 16, 1907, at the Carnegie Library in Oklahoma City. Of the eight public libraries then existing in the Oklahoma territories, six were represented at the meeting – Oklahoma City, Chickasha, Guthrie, Ardmore, Norman and Shawnee.

- The Oklahoma Library Commission was organized in 1919. This Commission is the oversight board for the Oklahoma State Department of Libraries.
- Vacation Reading Club, the forerunner of the Summer Reading Program, was launched in 1935 with 500 children enrolled the first summer. In the first two summers, more than 10,000 volumes were read by participating children.

- ***Dorothea Dale***

1st Secretary of Oklahoma Library Commission from its founding in 1919.

Helped start the University of Oklahoma School of Library and Information Science

Work focused on “traveling libraries” that took books out to rural communities during the Dust Bowl. In 1931 146,086 books were sent out in 4,215 traveling library collections to country schools, homes, churches, small public libraries, orphanages, hospitals, Boy Scouts, 4-H clubs, PTAs, and farm women’s clubs. The one condition was that everyone must be allowed to borrow and use the materials free of any charge.

- ***Edmon Low***

Long-time library lobbyist at the national level

While librarian at OSU, pushed for tax support of public libraries

- ***Allie Beth Martin***

Promoted collection development to meet the needs of minority communities, in the 1940s

Started working at Tulsa library as head of the extension service, including children’s work and bookmobiles

Widely published in library literature, including the influential *A Strategy for Public Library Change*.

- ***Ruth Brown***

Librarian at Bartlesville from 1919-1950

OLA Secretary in 1920, Treasurer in 1926, President in 1931

Advocated equal access to all, providing segregated story times to both black and white children and giving story hours at the black elementary school

Participated in a drugstore lunch counter “sit-in” with two black teachers in 1950

Accused of subversion by the Bartlesville City Commission and fired in 1950

For more information, see the book *The Dismissal of Miss Ruth Brown: Civil Rights, Censorship, and the American Library* by Louise S. Robbins.

In 1955 the Oklahoma Legislature approved the first multi-county and/or city/county library law: Title 65. (See Oklahoma Public Libraries and Library Systems *attachment*)

With the help of Low and Leta Dover, Martin successfully lobbied for the creation of multi-county public library systems and tax support for the Tulsa City-County Library.

1st Federal Library Services Act approved by Congress in 1956. This is the start of LSTA funding for public libraries.

The **Pioneer Multi-County Library** begins service on April 8, 1958, with the Norman Public Library as the headquarters for the state's first library system: Cleveland, Garvin, and McClain counties organize with seven libraries and a bookmobile.

Bill Lowry is appointed Librarian of Pioneer Multi-County Library System. Garvin County leaves the multi-county system. Pottawatomie County joins Cleveland and McClain counties in 1977 in the re-named Pioneer Library System.

Tulsa City-County Library System begins in 1962.

Oklahoma City-County Library System (now **Metropolitan Library System**) begins in 1977.

From 1889 to 1922, the **Carnegie Foundation** funded 25 library buildings, including 24 public libraries and a Carnegie Library at the University of Oklahoma, at a total cost of \$493,500.

The Foundation paid for the building and its furnishing, but expected the local communities to provide the site (preferably near the center of town), to purchase the books, and to allocate in the city budget an annual amount for library operating expenses of at least 10% of Carnegie's original gift.

Of the twenty-five Carnegie buildings built in Oklahoma, eight are still being used as public libraries, ten are used for other purposes, and seven have been demolished. (*For more information: Trustee Talk #8, September 2004*)

History of Public Libraries Worksheet

1. The numbering system used in most public libraries today was developed by _____.
2. How many and what type of Carnegie libraries were funded in Oklahoma?
3. The Oklahoma Library Association was established on _____ with _____ public libraries present at the first meeting.
4. The first subscription library was established in 1730 by _____.
5. Alexandria is in _____.
6. The first tax supported public library in the United States was established in 1833 in _____.
7. The American Library Association was established in _____ making it _____ years old.
8. In the 1930's the Oklahoma Library Commission (forerunner of ODL) mailed packages of books out to people who had no access to a library. Name three groups who regularly received these collections of books:

9. A 15th century invention that enabled books to be produced rapidly and inexpensively was the _____.
10. The groups most responsible for establishing the first public libraries in Oklahoma were _____.
11. Andrew Carnegie would give the money to build a library and purchase the initial collection only if the city or town _____.
12. Ruth Brown was ostensibly fired for _____ but was more likely fired because _____.
13. People in Boston established a public library in 1854 for many of the same reasons that people today value public libraries. Name two of these reasons:

14. The law allowing Oklahoma residents to establish public library systems was passed in _____.
15. The first library system in Oklahoma was _____.