

# A Brief History of Librarians and Image



## The Earliest Libraries

Libraries in the Western world began as archives in ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt. These archives were record depositories kept by court scribes and religious functionaries. Two of the first libraries we know of which were recognizable as organized collections of written knowledge were at Alexandria in Ptolemaic Egypt and Pergamum in Hellenic Turkey. Ancient librarians would have had high status in their societies because they were often scholars or priests and they would have been among the only people able to read.

## Medieval and Renaissance Libraries

During the Middle Ages in the West librarianship and libraries were centered around monasteries. The monks were scribes and in most cases the chief scribe was placed in charge of the library. These monasteries were the only repositories of written knowledge and in a period known for its religiosity these monk librarians were accorded a high status. In the later Middle Ages the stranglehold that monasteries had on knowledge in Europe was loosened, as universities were founded in cities like Bologna and Paris, with college libraries to follow.

## The Growth of Libraries

In the 1450's the Vatican Library was becoming a sizable manuscript collection of over 1200 volumes under the patronage of Pope Nicholas V but technical developments would soon change the definition of a large library collection. The development of movable type printing presses caused a revolution in the transmission of written knowledge and in the growth of libraries. The further development of printing led to a higher literacy rate along with the cheaper and more widely available books and sizable libraries became a status symbol among the elites of Europe. Royal libraries formed the basis of developing national libraries such as France's Bibliotheque Nationale which grew greatly during the reign of Louis XIV. But librarians were still largely classical or religious scholars, and, although honored members of society, they were not a profession unto themselves.

## Libraries in America

The beginnings of libraries in America came not long after the first colonies were founded and the first library to take on a permanent status in America was the Harvard College library founded in 1638. Library history in colonial America and the early United States includes the founding of a library in Philadelphia by Ben Franklin in 1731 and ends with Thomas Jefferson selling his library to be the basis of the Library of Congress in 1814. The nineteenth century would prove to be the birth of modern libraries and librarianship. The first tax-funded public libraries were developed in New England in the 1840's and the first recorded woman to work in a library was in 1856 at the Boston Athenaeum library.

## **Librarianship: A Profession**

The biggest changes in libraries in the U.S. occurred after the Civil War and 1876 has been called the 'annus mirabilis' of the professional librarian with the founding of the American Library Association and Melvil Dewey's publication of his Dewey Decimal Classification system. In 1887 Dewey founded the first library school at Columbia College in New York and the profession became more and more open to women through library education. In 1893 when Dewey was asked to recommend somebody to found the University of Illinois' library school he said "the best man in America is a woman, and she is in the next room"-- referring to Katharine Sharp who went on to become one of the most important library educators. The late 19th and early 20th century also saw an explosion in professional literature for librarians and further organization with the founding in 1909 of the Special Libraries Association. This growth in the profession was especially needed at this time because 1884 marked the year of the first public library funded by Andrew Carnegie and well over 1600 libraries would be funded by the philanthropist and his foundation down into the 20th century.

## **Librarianship in the 20th Century**

The 20th century saw the continued development of the library through education and organization. In 1928 the first Ph.D. in Library Science was awarded at the University of Chicago and the steady growth in Library Science programs continued with the opening of the University of Minnesota's department. But 1923 had seen a report by Charles Williamson for the Carnegie Corporation in which he had criticized the training of librarians and what he thought was the 'feminization' of the profession. As much as 90% of all library school students were female by that time but despite the still growing number of libraries and their importance to U.S. society librarianship as a profession was of relatively low status. But huge changes were on the horizon for the profession as first microforms in the thirties and forties and then electronic databases in the fifties and sixties. The library profession was becoming increasingly technical and what had started out as 'library economy' under Dewey was fast becoming 'information science' through the influence of George Boole's principles upon scientists like Claude Shannon and Mortimer Taube. Cultural stereotypes about librarians were being ingrained during the middle of this century in movies and popular culture and they tended to fall along the lines of the 'spinster' for women and the 'egghead' for men. The educational and technical advances of the profession only seemed to build on these unfortunate stereotypes.

## **Librarians at the End of the Century**

The further growth in electronic media available to the general public and its supposed ease of use have caused many to claim that librarianship as a profession will soon be obsolete. But the number of students attending library schools has increased over the last ten years and through changes in curricula library schools seem to be adapting to the new information landscape. The status of librarianship has remained a concern throughout this century as evidenced by the professional literature we have gathered but, stereotypes to the contrary, librarians have proven to be an adaptable profession that is especially concerned with its image and its future.

## **An Addendum: Famous Librarians in History**

Throughout history, many people who later became well known in other capacities served as librarians. In 1979, the journal *Library News* reprinted this section of *The Book of Lists*. Unfortunately, all the "famous people" listed are men. A comparable list for women would balance this view. (One example would be the recently deceased novelist, essayist, and poet Audre Lourde. Readers are encouraged to send other suggestions.) However, even with this gender bias, the following list does show the variety of people who have chosen to work in the field. More information about these "famous librarians" will be posted soon!

**Gottfried Von Leibniz (1646-1716)** was a German philosopher, mathematician, and intellectual giant of his time. Leibniz was appointed librarian at Hanover in 1676 and at Wolfenbuttel in 1691.

**David Hume (1711-1776)**, the British philosopher, economist, and historian, served as librarian from 1752-57 at the Library of the Faculty of the Advocates at Edinburgh, where he wrote his *History of England*.

**Casanova (1725-1798)** was not only a great lover. At the climax (!) of his career in 1785, the famous womanizer began 13 years as librarian for the Count von Waldstein in the chateau of Dux in Bohemia.

Swedish author **August Strindberg (1849-1912)** was made assistant librarian at the Royal Library in Stockholm in 1874.

**Pope Pius XI (1857-1939)** was a librarian before he became Pope. He served 19 years as a member of the College of Doctors of the Ambrosian Library in Milan, and then became chief librarian. In 1911 he was asked to reorganize and update the Vatican Library and four years later became prefect of the Vatican Library. From 1922 until his death in 1939, the former librarian served as pope.

**Sam Walter Foss (1858-1911)**, poet, author and columnist for the *Christian Science Monitor*, became librarian of the Somerville, MA public library in 1898.

**Archibald MacLeish (b. 1892)** had a varied professional life. He was a playwright, poet, lawyer, assistant secretary of state, winner of three Pulitzer prizes, and a founder of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). MacLeish was appointed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt as librarian of Congress in 1939 for five years.

**Mao Tse-Tung (1893-1976)** worked as an assistant to the chief librarian of the University of Peking.

Overlooked for advancement, he decided to get ahead in another field and eventually became chairman of the Chinese Communist Party.

FBI Head **J. Edgar Hoover (1895-1972)** was a Library of Congress messenger and cataloger in his first job.

Author **John Braine (b.1922)**, best known for the novel *Room at the Top* (1957), worked as a librarian for many years. He was assistant librarian at Bingley Public Library (1940-1951), branch librarian at Northumberland County Library (1954-56), and branch librarian at West Ridings of Yorks County Library (1956).

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