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## A History of US Public Libraries



"Rockingham County Library bookmobile and children," North Carolina, 1955. Courtesy of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources via North Carolina Digital Heritage Center.

For many Americans, their fondest memories revolve around a library card. From searching through the stacks, to getting a return date stamped on the back of a new favorite book, libraries are a quintessential part of how Americans learn and engage with their local communities. Since this country's founding, public libraries have received broad and consistent popular support for their democratic missions and services. The ability to access free information has become a core ideal of what it means to be an American citizen, despite periods of historic inequality. Libraries help make this access possible by placing public benefit at the center of their work and continually adapting their strategies to meet changing public needs over time.

This exhibition tells the story of the American public library system, its community impact, and the librarians who made it possible—from the founding of the first US libraries through the first one hundred years of service.

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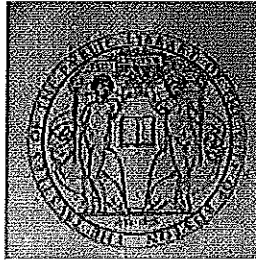
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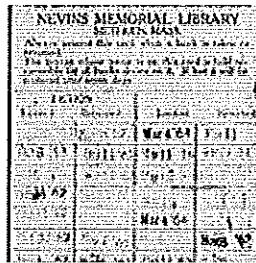
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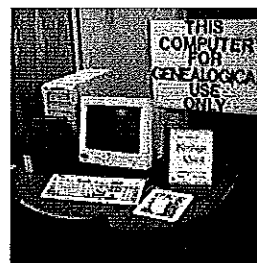
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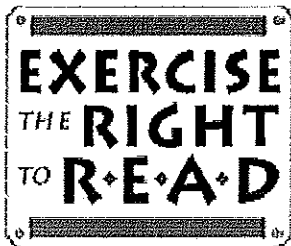
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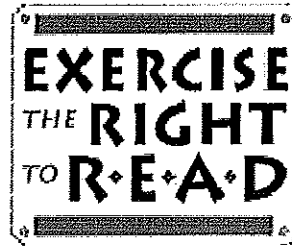


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## A Brief History of the Library



Collections of written knowledge were originally kept in what was called a *repository*. (*Reposit* means *to put away or store*. Think *deposit* which is similar in meaning.)

Written knowledge did not always mean books. Before books, there were clay tablets, and archeologists have discovered that the Mesopotamian people collected thousands of them in a repository more than 5,000 years ago! (Mesopotamia was an ancient region of southwest Asia in what is now modern-day Iraq.)

Archeologists have also uncovered collections of ancient papyrus scrolls that date back to 1300 B.C. (Papyrus scrolls were made from a grassy plant, and were used by Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans.)

The ancient Greeks promoted the idea of repositories through their keen interest in literacy and intellectual life. Collections in repositories began to grow because the Greeks encouraged authors to write on a variety of subjects, which copy shops then made into books.

These copy shops were not Kinko's! Copying books was done by hand, and (as you can imagine) it took a lot of care and concentration to make a copy exactly right. How accurately a book was copied was called its "trustworthiness". (Imagine accidentally leaving out the word *not* in the following sentence: *The emperor decided not to attack*. As you can see, a book's *trustworthiness* was very important!)

The repositories did not have shelves like our modern libraries do. The scrolls were kept in little slots, or pigeonholes, with their titles written on wooden tags at the openings.

There were various jobs to be had inside a repository. It was a great honor (and position of power) to serve as the *director*. Scrolls from the tagged pigeonholed shelves were fetched and returned by people called *pages*. They transported the scrolls in leather or wooden buckets. *Scribes* made copies of works to be added to a library's collection, and recopied scrolls that had been damaged.

But these repositories (or libraries) were only available to scholars and scientists. "Ordinary" people were not welcome. You could not just go down to your local repository and check out a scroll!

During the Renaissance era (14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries) wealthy people in Europe began building their own private libraries. It became a status symbol—if you were rich, you had a library!

It was Johann Gutenberg's 1450's invention of moveable type that changed bookmaking forever, replacing handwritten books with printed ones and making them more readily available.

There were many libraries established throughout Europe, but the oldest library in America started with a 400-book donation to a new university in Massachusetts by a man named John Harvard. (See how valuable books are? They named the university after him!) The first *public* library in the United States opened in New Hampshire in 1833. In the late 1800's and early 1900's, wealthy businessman Andrew Carnegie built and equipped over 3,000 public libraries in the United States.

Over the ages, libraries have been destroyed by wars, fires, and floods, but they have been rebuilt and expanded as a necessary and valuable repository of knowledge.

