

Philadelphia: Birthplace of Libraries

by Regina L. Smith



Philadelphia, notable for a number of firsts, has strong foundations with respect to the printed word. The first printing press in the middle colonies arrived in Philadelphia in 1685, three years after the arrival of William Penn. This fair city also has the honor of having published the first daily newspaper issued in the United States, the *American Daily Advertiser* (1784), as well as the first legal newspaper, the *Legal Intelligencer* (1843). More important, Philadelphia is home to many of the oldest libraries in America.

Books were rare and precious commodities in the colonies. Ships that arrived in Philadelphia had the necessities for daily life, but very few books. The books that did come to America were expensive and owned mostly by the wealthy. Those who owned books were eager to acquire more.

The Library Company of Philadelphia

In 1728, Benjamin Franklin organized a club of young men and named it the Junto, or the Club of Mutual Improvement. It was a proving ground for new and revolutionary ideas. The Junto's members first met at a local tavern. Its members consisted of a diverse group including Franklin, a copier of deeds for scribes, a mathematician, a surveyor-general of the province, a shoemaker, a joiner, a pressman, a printer and bookbinder, a compositor who was also an Oxford scholar, a gentleman of fortune, and a merchant's clerk.

At a meeting held in 1730, a member proposed that it might be more convenient to have books onsite, so that they could be consulted during discussions. The group decided to pool their individually owned

books and then strive to acquire others. From this organization grew the nation's first public library, the Library Company of Philadelphia. Its members drew up Articles of Agreement on July 1, 1731, with the original price of a share equaling forty shillings. Franklin often referred to the Library Company as "the mother of all the North American subscription libraries."

For most of that first year, its subscribers read from the collective books they had donated. In 1732 the first books to be purchased were ordered from London. They were housed in the home of Robert Grace, a Junto member. Louis Timothee, the first librarian, agreed to attend the library for the purpose of lending books on Wednesdays, from two to three o'clock in the afternoon, and from ten to four on Saturdays. Only members of the library could borrow books, but "any civil gentleman" could peruse the books of the library in the reading room. Franklin himself even served as librarian for a short period.

In subsequent years, other public libraries sprang up in Philadelphia—such as the Union Library Company, the Association Library, and the Amicable Library. They eventually merged their collections with the Library Company. By 1785, the Library Company had 400 members and, within a few years, its collection consisted of approximately 7700 volumes.

When Philadelphia was the seat of government for the newly formed United States of America (1790–1800), the Library Company was located in the Old State House, now known as Independence Hall, and offered its services to the United States Congress. Thus, it also served as the first Library of Congress.

The Library Company continues today. With the growth of free public libraries in the late 19th Century, the membership of the Library Company began to decline. Some of its collections were even absorbed by the public institutions. Today it is a

scholarly research library whose core collection contains materials acquired between its founding in 1731 and 1880. Its holdings comprise approximately 500,000 volumes.

Other notable Philadelphia libraries founded during the Colonial period include: the library at Christ Church, founded in 1698; the Library of Friends of Philadelphia (Quaker), founded in 1741; the Germantown Library, containing materials in German, founded in 1745; the Pennsylvania Hospital Library, founded in 1763. The English Academy, later known as the College of Philadelphia, now the University of Pennsylvania Libraries, was founded in 1749.

American Philosophical Society

Societies were also prominent in Colonial times and Philadelphia can claim another first with the American Philosophical Society, the oldest scientific institution in the United States. Benjamin Franklin founded the society in 1743 for promoting useful knowledge among the British plantations in America. Few of the Society's early documents have been preserved, but

we do know that the society considered and investigated botany, medicine, mineralogy and mining, mathematics, chemistry, mechanics, arts, trades, manufacturers, geography, topography, agriculture, and other disciplines. In 1769, the

organization became known as "The American Philosophical Society, held at Philadelphia, for Promoting Useful Knowledge." Presidents of the Society included Benjamin Franklin, David Rittenhouse, and Thomas Jefferson.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Society's library contained about 22,000 volumes in various languages, many of which were rare and valuable. (The library uses a special classification scheme that should be of interest to contemporary catalogers.) Today the American Philosophical Society Library houses more than 300,000 volumes;



7,000,000 manuscripts; 100,000 images; and thousands of hours of audio tape. It serves as a major research center for the history of the sciences, medicine and technology. Among its treasures are many Benjamin Franklin imprints and a significant portion of his personal library.

College of Physicians of Philadelphia

The College of Physicians of Philadelphia was founded in 1787 by 24 prominent Philadelphians. It is not an academic organization, but an educational and cultural institution dedicated to promoting a greater understanding of medicine and the roles of the physicians in contemporary society. Its library was established the following year when a member donated 16 of his own books to the College. Others followed suit, and in 1792 the college hired a librarian to manage the collection. Today, the Historical Services Division of the Library holds more than one million manuscripts. This division also contains 300,000 volumes of the Library's 375,000 volumes. The library is known for its pre-nineteenth century imprints, its more than 440 incunabula, and its extensive collection of nineteenth century medical journals.

Law Library Company of the City and County of Philadelphia (Jenkins)

The oldest law library in the country is the Law Library Company of the City and County of Philadelphia. It was founded in 1802 by 71 members of the Philadelphia bar for the purpose of maintaining a law library for the use of its members. Its first home was in the Old State House, now known as Independence Hall, in a room on the east side, most likely in the office of the Clerk of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. Many of its founders were also members of the American Philosophical Society and the Library Company.

Shares in the library were \$20 and annual dues were \$2. In 1802, there were only 11 volumes of American reports in print,

and the members resolved to purchase books locally at auction and also from London. In 1805, William Rawle published the library's first catalog, which contained listings for 391 volumes; it is believed that this is the first law catalog published in the nation.

The library underwent a number of changes in location and name. In 1827, it merged with the Associated Members of the Bar. The new organization was called the Law Association, which it remained until 1931, when it became known as the library of the Philadelphia Bar Association. It came to its current name in 1967, when it became the Theodore F. Jenkins Memorial Law Library Company, thanks to a generous bequest from Madeleine Hart Jenkins. Most members of the Philadelphia legal community refer to it as Jenkins.

The library does not have a permanent home and has occupied space in Independence Hall, Congress Hall, the Edward Shippen Building, the Athenaeum, City Hall, and the Widener Building. Today it is housed in an office building. The library still maintains its extensive portrait collection of judges and bar members. Jenkins is now a non-profit corporation that administers the county law library for the city and county of Philadelphia. It is still a membership library, and continues to circulate most of its collection to members.



The public is permitted to use its resources for a daily fee. It currently has more than 9000 members and its collection contains more than 300,000 volumes.

Athenaeum

Another notable post-Colonial library is the Athenaeum of Philadelphia, founded in 1813 by half a dozen young men, most of whom were recent University of Pennsylvania graduates. They published an

address in the local newspapers announcing the project, and more than one hundred subscribers signed on by early February 1814, when a meeting was held at which rules were adopted and the

Philadelphia Library Web Sites

The Library Company of Philadelphia
www.librarycompany.org

The American Philosophical Society
www.amphilsoc.org

College of Physicians of Philadelphia Library
www.colphyphil.org

The Jenkins Memorial Law Library
www.jenkinslaw.org

The Athenaeum
www.libertynet.org/athena

Free Library of Philadelphia
www.library.phila.gov

Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia
Ewell Sale Stewart Library
www.acnatsci.org/library

AIDS Information Network Library
www.ain.org

Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies Library
www.libertynet.org/balch

German Society of Philadelphia
Joseph Horner Memorial Library
www.libertynet.org/~gsp

Pennsylvania Hospital, Medical Library
www.pahosp.com

Pennsylvania Horticultural Society
McLean Library
www.libertynet.org/phs/phslibrary.html

Philadelphia Museum of Art Library
www.philamuseum.org/resources/library.shtml

Rosenbach Museum & Library
www.rosenbach.org

University of Pennsylvania
www.library.upenn.edu

name agreed upon. The annual dues were \$5. The first president was William Tilghman, then Chief Justice of Pennsylvania. The group leased two rooms for the library in a building at the southeast corner of Fourth and Chestnut Streets.

On Monday, March 7, 1814, the rooms were opened to subscribers. The founders promised they would have a reading room containing the newspapers and periodical publications of Philadelphia, as well as those from other states, and pamphlets of a useful or amusing nature, as well as

continued on page 24

maps and charts. The objectives of the organization were to have a library of general reference, particularly of standard dictionaries, and such original and valuable works in the learned and modern languages as are not usually found in other libraries. In addition, they wanted to collect the laws of the United States, Congressional journals, important state papers, reviews and scientific journals and magazines of Europe, and the best modern works.

This was an ambitious program for a reading room library. The Pennsylvania Legislature refused to grant the organization a charter on the grounds that some of its members had an objectionable political complexion, but the Pennsylvania Supreme Court granted the Athenaeum a charter of incorporation in April 1815. The Athenaeum offered all citizens of Philadelphia the opportunity for self-improvement, and it also offered them the opportunity to interact with each other. Its collection was scholarly, yet the 1820

catalog lists *Bandit Bride* (whose unbridled banditry fills three exciting volumes), *Chit-Chat of Paris* (very racy), and *Night Mare Abbey* (all too plainly a forerunner of the modern whodunit), among others.

Today the Athenaeum remains a subscription library, and is known for its premier collection of architecture and building technology as well as interior design materials, pre-1914 periodicals, and trade catalogs.

Free Library of Philadelphia

The Free Library of Philadelphia was founded in 1891 out of the need for an adequate public and free library. The main building, located at 19th and the Parkway, was designed by Horace Trumbauer, a noted architect of the time. Today it is one of the city's most vital institutions and it now has 54 neighborhood branches. The library is known for its many special collections, including the Hampton L. Carson Collection (American and English

autographs, legal prints, books on the Common law); John Frederick Lewis Collections (cuneiform tablets, 9th–18th century European manuscripts, Oriental manuscripts and miniatures); Kate Greenway; Beatrix Potter; Richard Gimbel collection (Edgar Allen Poe manuscripts, letters, 1st editions and subsequent printings); and many more too numerous to list. It also has excellent collections in orchestral music, art/picture/print, newspapers, and maps.

You can take a virtual tour of these libraries by visiting their home pages. In addition to the libraries described in this article, the sidebar lists home pages from other special libraries in Philadelphia. Be sure to make time to visit them in person while attending the Annual Meeting and Conference in Philadelphia this summer.

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