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 in 1704, 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 consisted of a diverse group including Franklin, a copier of deeds for scriveners, 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 Timothée, 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 1699; the Library of Friends of Philadelphia (Quaker), founded in 1741; the German town 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, manufactures, 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 midnineteenth 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, continued on page 8.
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 following the first and the Library Company of Philadelphia. The College of Physicians was also members of the American Philosophical Society. Many of its founders were also members of the Philadelphia 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 9,000 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 name agreed upon. The annual dues were $5. The first president was William Tighman, 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

**Philadelphia Library We Sites**

- The Library Company of Philadelphia
  - www.librarycompany.org
- The American Philosophical Society
  - www.amphilsoc.org
- College of Physicians of Philadelphia Library
  - www.copphil.org
- The Jenkins Memorial Law Library
  - www.jenkinslaw.org
- The Athenaeum
  - www.athenaiem.org
- Free Library of Philadelphia
  - www.library.phila.gov
- Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia
  - Ewell Sale Stewart Library
  - www.anasals.org/library
- Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies Library
  - www.libertynet.org/balch
- German Society of Philadelphia
  - Joseph Horner Memorial Library
  - www.libertynet.org/jhp
- Pennsylvania Hospital, Medical Library
  - www.pahosp.com
- Pennsylvania Horticultural Society
  - McLean Library
  - www.library.pihs/philibrary.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

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Private Law Libraries SIS:
Déjà vu all over again
Rita (Andia MacDowell). Have you ever had déjà vu?
Phil (Bill Murray). Didn’t you just ask me that?
Like Bill Murray in the movie “Groundhog Day,” some private law librarians wonder if we are endlessly repeating the issues that challenge us until we too, get it right. After reviewing some old copies (1978–1988) of The Private Law Firm Library, Managing the Private Law Library, and the Private Law Librarians from Practising Law Institute, it appears we are getting better at meeting some of our challenges.
Twenty years ago, we praised new capabilities on WESTLAW and LEXIS, automated catalogs in firm libraries and fee-based databases such as Disclosure, Orbit, Dialog and the New York Times Database. While we loved the new IBM Correcting Selectric, and marvelled over the fax machine, a few were lucky enough to have e-mail and personal computers. Photocopiers moved into prominence and most of us used the telephone to communicate with our peers.
In 1977 the Practising Law Institute held its first Private Law Librarian Program. Does it surprise you we knew to discuss the quality of legal research taught in law schools, copyright, relationships with vendors, budget cuts, and cost containment? Law firm librarians were beginning to move into management and rethinking ways to better serve their attorneys and increase access to information.
Since its formation in 1976, PLL’s membership has doubled. Although many of the issues remain the same, the elements have changed. Discussions of vendor relations now focus on megacompanies and spiraling costs; online databases now include the vast resources of the Internet. Our paths of communication have opened to include our newsletter, I stserv and Web page. PLL provides substantive programs at the Annual Meeting and has established good working relationships with the American Bar Association and the Association of Legal Administrators. Unlike Bill Murray, we do not always meet the same people in our repeating days but we do find that each day offers new challenges that our colleagues and association help us master.
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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 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 Library in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

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