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## ▣ PUBLIC HEALTH

See COMMUNITY HEALTH SYSTEMS; COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH CENTERS; HEALTHY COMMUNITIES; SOCIAL SERVICES

## ▣ PUBLIC LIBRARIES

In the United States, public libraries were first established in New England in the mid-nineteenth century as a reflection of the belief in human rights, political equality, and the citizenry's responsibility to safeguard democracy. Early public libraries—especially the Boston Public Library founded in 1852—were viewed as the capstone of a tax-supported education system. As the West was settled, state after state enacted legislation establishing taxation for public libraries. This growth was due in large part to the contribution of women's organizations, philanthropy, the establishment of state commissions, and the organization of librarians into the American Library Association (1876). The presence of a public library in almost every U.S. city and county is ongoing testimony to the ideal of democracy. In 2002, the National Center for Education Statistics reported 9,046 public libraries (administrative entities) in the fifty states and the District of Columbia, with 16,220 service points holding 747 million items and circulating 1.7 billion items.

The growth and development of public libraries worldwide is fostered by the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA). The *Guidelines for Public Library Service* (2001) include statements underscoring the international acceptance of the public library as an essential community service, such as “An important role of the public library is providing an important focus for cultural and artistic development in

the community and helping to shape and support the cultural identity of the community.”

## LIFELONG LEARNING FOR LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Public libraries were initially established in the United States as a supplement to the public school systems, to provide books and journals for general culture, political issues, and career advancement. Librarians spent a great deal of time identifying the best books; they added popular fiction mainly to attract readers to these “better” books, but they later realized that many people simply enjoyed having recreational reading available. By the mid-1890s, librarians began to assume a more assertive stance in developing community-based services aimed at educating children, providing information, and helping immigrants. As librarians became more actively involved in their communities—a move that accelerated during World War I—they participated in the growing adult education movement. By the late 1930s, the idea of the public library as “the people's university” took hold, and the library was viewed as a potential leader in adult education in the local community.

This educational mission has persisted as a central purpose of public libraries in the United States; libraries now provide a continuum of services, including ensuring basic literacy, supplying those who need English-as-a-Second-Language materials, and offering free-choice learning. These services are almost always in partnership with community agencies such as Head Start, adult basic education programs, and state humanities councils.

Public librarians today offer services that reflect the needs of local communities—from literacy classes for the Kootenai Indians and Spanish-speaking residents in the Boundary Library District of Idaho to the many book festivals and One Community, One Book initiatives throughout the nation. Through these initiatives, a community (it could be a city or even a state) reads and discusses the same book. From people in Lafayette, Louisiana, reading the work of Ernest Gaines, to those in Eugene, Oregon, reading *Sometimes a Great Notion* by Ken Kesey, public libraries bring communities together around life's profound meanings.

## PUBLIC LIBRARIES PRESERVE AND DEFEND THE CULTURAL HERITAGE

Public libraries work to preserve the cultural heritage and traditions of local communities. They organize, preserve,

and make available the artifacts of a community's shared past through local history collections, oral histories, genealogy services, and exhibitions. A few examples include the Steel City Hall of Fame and Local History Collection at the Gary, Indiana, Public Library; the Cleveland Public Library's 1.3 million photographs from Cleveland's past—including some digitized photos that can be viewed over the Internet; civil rights history at the Greensboro, North Carolina, Public Library; and the San Francisco Public Library's Gay and Lesbian Center devoted to the documentation of all aspects of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered experience. The U.S. Institute of Museums and Library Services, established in 1996, has been instrumental in strengthening public library collaborations with museums, historical societies, archives, and zoos.

A central ethic of public librarians is the right to read freely. In the 1930s, for example, some local communities banned John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* from public libraries, fearing that the novel might foment discontent among workers. In response to this censorship, librarians adopted the Library Bill of Rights, which affirms the values that librarianship holds central.

The American Library Association has approved the mandate that libraries preserve democratic society by making available the widest possible range of viewpoints, opinions, and ideas, so that all individuals have the opportunity to become lifelong learners—informed, literate, educated, and culturally enriched. To this end, public librarians have also adopted the *Freedom to Read Statement* that asserts free communication is essential to the preservation of a free society and a creative culture. It is not enough to organize and preserve the artifacts of each community's shared cultural heritage—the right of freedom of access must also be defended.

## A Place That Feels Like Home

*The Mason Library in the small New England town of Great Barrington, Massachusetts, is an architectural gem inside and out. It is also a haven for young and old alike. Rachel Christensen, a frequent visitor to the library since she was a little girl, writes about it here from the perspective of an eighth-grader who was asked to describe a place she knows well for a school assignment.*

I could feel the age in the architecture. The ceiling is arched, and is covered in ornate molding, which continues down the walls and covers a fireplace that hasn't seen use in many years. All of this is colored a rich cream. From the ceiling hang three chandeliers suspended on orange braided ropes. The floor is made of red bricks, worn smooth by countless feet. All of it is aged, but it somehow seems to be in good condition despite that.

The furniture gave mixed impressions, old pieces and some newer pieces that seemed almost out of place. People sat at small circular tables of reddish-orange wood, covered in books and papers. I could hear the rustling of pages as they were turned and smell slightly musty old books. In front of me sat the card catalog, which I had never found very useful. Among the bookshelves people moved, browsing the stacks just as I've done many times. Most of the bookshelves are made of varnished wood that accents the wood grain, leading to a very pretty effect. Though I didn't have a direct view of the desk from where I sat, I could hear the computer running, beeping every time the librarian scanned a book in. Outside I could hear cars racing by on Main Street and could see the flag waving in the breeze. The tables and shelves have probably been here since the library opened in the early 1900s, though the computer system just booted up a month ago.

It all serves to illustrate my point, that the library is a beautiful mix of old and new combined to form a magnificent whole. The architecture of the building and its simpler furnishing, such as the tables, give the whole place a quiet, elegant look that lets you relax and enjoy the peace with an interesting story or research topic. Meanwhile, the computer system is helpful in locating these interesting stories and research topics, while not intruding on the mood. I think the library is very well planned, and I think it can't really get any better than that. The color scheme of wood, warm reds, and cream just accentuates this. I hope that anyone who reads this has a library to read it in, as a person without one is missing out on a great experience.

—Rachel Christensen

## PUBLIC LIBRARIES AS A PUBLIC SPHERE

Public libraries provide a public sphere or commons where community members can gather to discuss, conduct research, and assemble to address issues of local and broader concern. McCabe (2001) has described this aspect of the social mission of the public library as civic librarianship. It has been enhanced by reading and viewing discussion programs funded by the U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities and local humanities councils, on topics such as *From Rosie to Roosevelt: A Film History of Americans in World War II*

## Excerpt From the American Library Association's *Freedom to Read Statement*

We believe that free communication is essential to the preservation of a free society and a creative culture. We believe that these pressures toward conformity present the danger of limiting the range and variety of inquiry and expression on which our democracy and our culture depend. We believe that every American community must jealously guard the freedom to publish and to circulate, in order to preserve its own freedom to read. We believe that publishers and librarians have a profound responsibility to give validity to that freedom to read by making it possible for the readers to choose freely from a variety of offerings. The freedom to read is guaranteed by the Constitution. Those with faith in free people will stand firm on these constitutional guarantees of essential rights and will exercise the responsibilities that accompany these rights.

Adopted June 25, 1953; revised January 28, 1972, January 16, 1991, July 12, 2000, by the ALA Council and the AAP Freedom to Read Committee.

Source: *The Freedom to Read Statement*. American Library Association. Retrieved February 26, 2003, from <http://www.ala.org/alaorg/oif/freeread.html>.

and *Post War Years, Cold War Fears: American Culture and Politics*. Thousands of people in communities large and small have come together to discuss history, politics, and current events, informed by the resources of public libraries.

Public libraries provide people with vital information to solve problems and to participate in the formation of public policy. Durrance and Fisher-Pettigrew (2002) have examined the roles that public libraries play in building community as providers of community information (CI), especially as CI becomes widely available in digital formats and is distributed by multiple agencies. Their research has resulted in the development of approaches that permit librarians to establish, from the perspective of citizens, such community-focused services as community databases of social services information, community technology programs for teenagers that seek to bridge the digital divide, and services designed to help immigrants gain the skills they need to become citizens.

## PUBLIC LIBRARIES BUILDING COMMUNITIES

U.S. public libraries have continuously expanded and refined their mission during their 150-year history. Today the public library carries out three basic community-building functions: It is a center for lifelong learning, a preserver and defender of cultural heritage, and a vibrant component of the community's public sphere. In the monograph *A Place at the Table*, McCook (2001) has defined the systematic steps that public librarians must take to activate the role of community building in concert with comprehensive community initiatives in the spirit of systems integration. Themes of American Library Association Millennial Presidents Sarah Ann Long, "Libraries Build Community" (1999–2000), and Nancy Kranich, "Libraries: The Cornerstone of Democracy" (2000–2001), emphasize the scope of the public library contribution to community. As the American Library Association (1999) has affirmed, "Libraries are a legacy to each generation, offering the heritage of the past and the promise of the future." This spirit echoes the 1994 international "Public Library Manifesto," which affirms the belief of UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) that the public library is "a living force for education, culture and information, and as an essential agent for the fostering of peace and spiritual welfare through the minds of men and women."

—Kathleen de la Peña McCook

### Further Reading

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