



Library Collection Development in America Through the Ages, a brief synopsis

By Jackie McGuire

Reference Librarian at a Florida public library

At what point in American history did public libraries experience a shift from collections based solely on puritanical and absolutist principles to collections reflecting intellectual freedom?

Colonial America (1700-1850s): Moral Absolutist Collection Development

According to McCook and Bossaller, social libraries of early 1700s colonial America contained "literature, history, science, and theology, whereas circulating libraries consisted mainly of popular reading." However, further reading revealed that circulating libraries "often included fiction . . . and they closed after just a few years." [1] Perhaps this can be attributed in part to the overarching moral principles guiding colonial life in America at a time when religion dominated everyday life. In fact, "The New England colonists—with the exception of Rhode Island—were predominantly Puritans, who, by and large, led strict religious lives. The clergy was highly educated and devoted to the study and teaching of both Scripture and the natural sciences." [2]

Michael Harris, a contemporary critic addressing the formation of the Boston Public Library in the mid-1800s, asserted that the formation of the library was supported by the proposition that the library would act as a moral buffer to purify the city through education in religion. [2] The overarching moral agenda of the time appears to have informed collection development principles.

American Reconstruction (1865-1877): Expanding Access in Library Collections

The American Library Association (ALA) was founded in 1876, near the end of American Reconstruction, with a central mission to ensure access to information. At this time, the United States Department of the Interior released a special report on the state of America's libraries entitled, *Public libraries in the United States of America; their history, condition, and management*. [3] This document contains over a thousand pages of opinion-based assertions, statistical data, and facts regarding law, medical, school, special, and public libraries of the time.



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American Reconstruction (1865-1877): Expanding Access in Library Collections

According to the report,

When we consider the vast multitudes of people who are destitute of literary culture—and they may be none the worse citizens, and many even may be bright thinkers—we need not be disappointed that so many read what, in a literary sense, are poor books; and that so few read for other reasons than to refresh themselves after sterner work.[3]

Although the sentiment for reading as a pastime rather than as a means of formal education is alluded to, one may conclude that the content of the statement reflects a societal shift from moral absolutism to one of democratic exploration. Jesse H. Shera's book, *Foundations of The Public Library: The Origins of The Public Library Movement In New England 1629-1855*, reveals that libraries in colonial America tended to be reflective of the communities in which they were rooted.

Many books that subsequently formed small libraries were bequeathed by ministers, wealthy citizens of good community standing, and other affluent individuals. The collections formed from these philanthropic donations were likely indicative of the personal and moral value systems of the individuals who first gifted them

although titles housed within these institutions at the time remain largely unknown. However, the collection development principles of the time period did not satisfy all audiences. “At Abington, Connecticut, the Social Library (1793) was subject to so much criticism because of its excessive emphasis on theological works that in 1804 the Junior Library of Abington was organized in protest.”[4]

School district libraries were created during this time, later becoming the basis for the modern, tax-supported public library. Henry Barnard, the United States Commissioner on Education in Connecticut, shed light on the views of those tasked with the creation of school district libraries in the mid-1800s:

The farmer, mechanic, manufacturer, and in fine, all the inhabitants of a district, of both sexes, and in every condition and employment of life, should have books which will shed light and dignity on their several vocations, help them better to understand the history and condition of the world and the country in which they live, their own nature, and their relations and duties to society, themselves and their Creator. [4]



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The Progressive Era (1896-1916) and the Roaring Twenties (1920-1929): Expanding Collective Knowledge

Prior to and during the Progressive Era and the Roaring Twenties, over two thousand public libraries were constructed, many in traditionally rural and underserved areas in the midwestern United States. These libraries, funded by steel industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, sought to educate the communities in which they were rooted. Criticisms of Carnegie libraries suggest that their creation served to dampen the civil unrest of the lower and middle classes at the turn of the twentieth century through alignment with the economic and political views of the wealthy upper class.

Fiction books were by and large begrudgingly accepted by educational representatives of the United States Government at this time as a means of relief from study and an outlet for enjoyment.⁴ It would not be until the turn of the twenty-first century that one begins to see a great shift from public libraries serving to educate to public libraries serving to provide unrestricted access to all kinds of information.

Mid- to Late-Twentieth Century (1930s-1990s): Library Collections for Social Justice

The mid-twentieth century was a time of unprecedented change for library support in the United States. Following World War II, the ALA tasked itself with a great feat—to rebuild European library collections destroyed during battles.^[7] Simultaneously, on the home front, landmark legislation was concerned with American social justice and civil rights, including legislation supporting public libraries.

The Library Services Act (LSA) of 1956, signed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, later expanded into the Library Services and Construction Act under President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964, “part of the Great Society program that President Johnson designed to help poor and working-class Americans.”^[5] Passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made it illegal to segregate public spaces including public libraries. This legislation affirmed equal access to information for all. Shortly after, in 1996, the Library Services and Technology Act was passed—legislation that no longer funds library construction but serves as the primary source of federal support for all types of libraries in the United States.



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Mid- to Late-Twentieth Century (1930s-1990s):

The latter half of the twentieth century was a time of great political and social reform. Diverse literary voices were emphasized in library collections, as barriers to access were removed. Diversity in literature in the 1960s was reflected through the emergence of groundbreaking publications, among them a children's book, *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats (1962).

According to the Library of Congress, *The Snowy Day* was the first full-color picture book with an African American as the main character,"[8] earning the Caldecott Medal in 1963. Other popular works of literature in America during this period included titles by underrepresented authors that tackled social justice, such as *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown (1970) and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison (1987), among many others.[8]

The Twenty-first Century: Diversity of Library Collections and Challenging Censorship

The beginning of the twenty-first century saw a great increase in the amount and scope of diverse library collections that were inclusive of all voices.

The ALA was at the forefront of implementing best practice guidelines for library collections with their statement adopted in the early 1980s, "Diverse Collections: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights." [5] However, it was not until 2017 when censorship was challenged head-on by ALA's statement, "Equity, Diversity, Inclusion: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights," [6] citing that it was ultimately the duty of the library to provide unimpeded access to information, including in library collections.

Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.[6]

Around the same time, many grassroots organizations including "We Need Diverse Books" sprang up across the United States with the mission to ensure that literature housed in libraries is representative of all voices. What is the next step in library collection development? Some argue that refinement of collection development tools to audit the diversity and inclusivity of collections in real-time may be the next frontier to tackle; others cite-



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that recent publication trends may influence the format, size, and scope of materials acquired and maintained in the coming years. Only time will tell what unique challenges librarians must overcome next to uphold the Library Bill of Rights and to provide a space espoused by many as a cornerstone of democracy.

Endnotes

- 1 - de la Peña McCook, K., & Bossaller, J. S. (2018). Introduction to public librarianship. (3rd. ed.). American Library Association.
- 2 - Religion in Colonial America: Trends, Regulations, and Beliefs. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.facinghistory.org/nobigotry/religion-colonial-america-trends-regulations-and-beliefs#:~:text=Toward%20the%20end%20of%20the,well%2C%20including%20Baptists%20and%20Anglicans>.
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