

INTRODUCTION

In 1894 Albert D. Wood, an engineer-turned-attorney in Warren, Pennsylvania, listened carefully to the proceedings of the annual meeting of the Warren Library Association (WLA). Despite booming timber and oil industries in the region, Warren was a relatively small community and the WLA had struggled financially throughout its twenty-one-year history. To meet operating expenses, the association charged annual dues and held ticketed events. It also relied heavily on volunteers. Wood had written the library's first catalog and reshelved books.¹ Despite the WLA's tenuous circumstances, however, Wood believed that membership fees were unnecessary. He stood and spoke:

I know that it is urged that that principle of giving something for nothing is a bad one and leads to indifference and want of appreciation, but in its application to libraries this result does not appear to follow. Perhaps it is not so much the price charged, as the feeling that it is a class privilege that is maintained, which deters many from becoming ticket members . . . [As] soon as possible (and a distinct effort should be made to bring it about), we should throw open our doors to all and offer to the public an absolutely "Free Library."²

To this end, Wood proposed that twenty-five of Warren's leading citizens commit to giving ten dollars per year, thereby replacing the negligible income that the WLA received through annual fees. Wood made the first pledge, and others soon followed his lead. Thus on June 1, 1894, Warren's library was reopened as a free institution. Under the "pay system," it had attracted only 250 members and monthly circulation was about 400 volumes. By the end of 1894, however, more than a thousand people—about one out

of every six Warren residents—had joined. They were borrowing nearly three thousand books per month.³ Wood died the following year, but Warren has provided free library service ever since. By no means was it unique. Across Pennsylvania, citizens repeatedly chose to open their wallets to support libraries. Through public activism and generosity, community access to recreational reading materials, information, and cultural activities was forever changed.

Over the past decade, many people have asked me, “Why study libraries?” I usually reply, “Why not?” Mark Kurlansky, one of my favorite writers, has covered baseball in the Dominican Republic, the song “Dancing in the Street” by Martha and the Vandellas, and the history of frozen food. The most compelling stories are those that seem mundane on the surface but have influenced society in profound ways. Free public libraries, which are more ubiquitous in the United States than McDonalds, are that type of phenomenon.⁴ Many communities have libraries—millions of people use and love them, but few outside of a small circle of academic scholars know why or how they developed.

My own work on the history of Pennsylvania’s public libraries was inspired by personal experiences, curiosity, and frustration. More than fifteen years ago, I relocated from Maryland to Pennsylvania for a new job. I had been an avid user of the Baltimore County Public Library, so one Saturday I Googled “dauphin county library” and stopped by a branch of the Dauphin County Library System (DCLS). As I was filling out a registration form, the assistant noticed my address and told me that my “membership” would cost \$60. “But I live in Dauphin County!” I sputtered. “Yes,” she said, “but Middletown doesn’t pay the county tax. It’s not part of our system.” Noticing my hesitation, the assistant asked, “Why don’t you just use Middletown’s library?” I drove home, found the Middletown Public Library, and obtained my first Pennsylvania library card.

Today, any resident of Dauphin, Cumberland, or Perry County can obtain free borrowing privileges from the DCLS, a result of its state designation as a District Library Center and evolving interpretations of what district responsibility includes. Still, I remained fascinated with what I call the Pennsylvania library “un-system.” I soon learned that Hershey’s library, like Middletown’s, is independent of the DCLS. To the south, most York County libraries are part of a system, but the Annie Sterline Library in Lewisberry touts itself as independent, proud not to be funded by state or federal dollars. Perry, to the west, doesn’t appear to have a county system,

but libraries in Blain, Marysville, New Bloomfield, and Newport seem to be loosely linked through a common website. I also discovered that Pennsylvania libraries vary in corporate structure and financing. Some are agencies of county or city governments, while others are nonprofit organizations. Many struggle to provide twenty-first-century information access through aging buildings, decades-old technology, and inadequate book and media collections. They experience annual stress in having to “pass the hat” among county commissioners, local government officials, school districts, and charitable foundations.

Why is it this way? I wondered.

In 2005 my family and I purchased a very old home on Main Street in Middletown and began to renovate it. Through the endless monotony of scraping, sanding, and painting, I started to compare Pennsylvania’s library un-system to the battered structure under my fingertips. Over the centuries, my home has been continually altered. The foundation and floor joists date from the late 1700s, while my living room, dining room, and two second-floor bedrooms were built in the 1830s. A major addition in the 1850s doubled the square footage. Then, in the 1920s, new owners partitioned the building into a two-family dwelling. They added kitchens, a shared front porch, and a garage. Fifty years later, others sided the house with aluminum and built a large backyard deck. To me, Pennsylvania’s library un-system has a similar vibe of add-ons, cobblings together, and occasional force fits. Rather than ripping everything down to the studs, it appears that library leaders continually reused existing materials—sometimes awkwardly, sometimes papering over cracks—so that new structures often appear fresher than they really are. As ridges in a wall’s plaster are sometimes evidence of enclosed windows or doorways, the oddities of today’s public libraries can be better understood when we know more about their history. As a new tenure-track librarian within a research-oriented university, I needed a topic that could fill a lifetime of scholarly effort. This was it.

My initial research questions were basic but wide-ranging. What is already known about the history of public libraries in Pennsylvania? How was Pennsylvania influenced by national trends in librarianship, and how does its experience compare to other states? What role, if any, did Pennsylvania play in the library movement that touched so many corners of the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? If little is known about these topics, can I establish a basic chronology and identify major trends? Which were the important institutions? Who were the no-

table professional leaders, government officials, and advocates? How about legal developments? Does Pennsylvania's current "un-system" have historical explanations?

Over the course of more than a decade, I utilized archival records of the American Library Association, the Pennsylvania Library Association, the State Library of Pennsylvania, and more than thirty public libraries throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. I sought library-related materials at the Senator John Heinz History Center in Pittsburgh and nearly thirty county historical societies. In addition, I tapped archival collections of the Pennsylvania Young Men's Christian Association, the Pennsylvania Federation of Women's Clubs, the Pennsylvania State Grange, and other organizations that significantly contributed to library development. While I initially focused on the crucial turn-of-the-century period (e.g., 1876–1918) that others have studied, I soon discovered that the story of public libraries in Pennsylvania must encompass the colonial, early national, and antebellum periods, as well as World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II. Additional details about my methods and sources appear in a separate section.

Some of my research questions proved easier to answer than others. I quickly learned that Pennsylvania's library history has not been thoroughly examined. Half a century ago, Haynes McMullen published an article about social libraries that had existed before 1876. His work was primarily statistical, finding that libraries were more likely to appear among denser populations.⁵ Libraries in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh have been mentioned to varying extents in classic studies such as Dee Garrison's *Apostles of Culture* and Abigail A. Van Slyck's *Free to All*, but other Pennsylvania communities are seldom included.⁶ While Deanna B. Marcum's *Good Books in a Country Home*, Wayne A. Wiegand's *Main Street Public Library*, and other works focus on small, rural institutions in the Middle Atlantic and Midwest, there are virtually no studies of Pennsylvania libraries that attempt similar scholarly rigor.⁷ Histories of single institutions have been published, often by libraries celebrating anniversaries or by scholars who live nearby. Unfortunately, they rarely situate individual libraries within larger contexts. Worse, they do not always cite primary sources. Nevertheless, I determined that the Keystone State is greatly important to the history of public libraries in the United States. Its large number of residents, distributed across far-flung and complex terrain, partially explain Pennsylvania's substantial number of public libraries. Furthermore, Pennsylvania has exported millions of people south and west, influencing the culture, politics, and social structures of

those regions.⁸ There is much credence to claims that America's circulating libraries started in Pennsylvania, given the founding of the pathbreaking Library Company of Philadelphia by Benjamin Franklin. Moreover, Andrew Carnegie's philanthropic program, which ultimately built more than 1,600 libraries across the country, began its US phase in the Pittsburgh area in the 1880s. Pennsylvania's libraries are also worthy of study because they serve a fascinating diversity of communities, including industrial metropolises like Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, mining areas like Pottsville and Wilkes-Barre, farmlands such as Gettysburg and Lancaster, woodlands around Lock Haven and Warren, and small towns throughout the state.

To my surprise and disappointment, I found few models for the state-level history that I wanted to write. Through existing databases and bibliographies, I was able to identify abundant articles and books that focused on certain types of librarianship (such as bookmobiles or children's librarianship), services to certain populations (such as African Americans), or narrow time periods (such as the colonial era). Yet I found only a handful of studies that attempted to comprehensively describe library development across an entire state over a long period.⁹ The closest example is an edited volume about New Jersey; however, public libraries, county libraries, the state library, the state library association, and other topics are treated as separate developments, which obscures the ways that these entities co-developed and collaborated. Also, few of the book's primary sources are drawn from midsized and small public libraries.¹⁰ The same is generally true of a volume sponsored by the Mississippi Library Association.¹¹ For other states, such as Vermont, there have been attempts to capture the histories of most, if not every, public library within their jurisdiction, yet little or no attempt was made to identify and discuss important general themes.¹² One helpful study of California offered the integrative approach I wanted; it utilized materials from numerous public libraries, too. Unfortunately, though, it focused on a narrow window of time—the 1880s through 1910s.¹³ In several other cases, state-level library histories focus heavily on the mid-late twentieth century because it was the time period the authors were most familiar with, or because settlement in the state occurred later.¹⁴ Thus the present work breaks new ground on several fronts.

The title of this book, *Made Free and Thrown Open to the Public* (hereafter, *Made Free*), is a deliberate choice. The phrases *made free* and *thrown open* appear in many descriptions of library openings during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The mental imagery that the words evoke—heavy doors being unlocked and swung open, throngs of patrons stamped-

ing across the threshold—is an apt metaphor for the dramatic expansion in library access that Pennsylvanians experienced. Such openings were often celebrated with public speeches, receptions, concerts, and even commemorative souvenirs (see fig. I.1). Part of this is due to civic pride, but today, such events are even more important for marking the beginning of new relationships and interactions between libraries and users. In the Keystone State, many libraries were not initially established as free institutions. Instead, they began as fee-based entities governed by shareholders and only available to paid subscribers. In response to philanthropic impulses and social concerns, the trustees and managers of these libraries purposefully rewrote policies and actively sought additional funding in order to convert them into free institutions. In communities that had no libraries, literacy advocates and donors created them from the ground up, adamant that reading materials and related programming should be available to every resident, regardless of their ability to pay. As the decades unfolded, the public demanded and experienced additional collections, services, and representation within these institutions, influencing library development in ways that are fascinating and profound. Pennsylvania public libraries were not *born* free, but *made* free, and this transition is a story worth telling.

Made Free also attempts to restore significant, neglected protagonists to the story. Wayne A. Wiegand has written important essays on the “tunnel vision and blind spots” within library history scholarship, noting that researchers pay little attention to libraries’ provision of popular reading material or to their role as “civic commons”—two functions that have mattered greatly to library patrons.¹⁵ He went on to devote an entire book, *Part of Our Lives: A People’s History of the American Public Library*, to users’ experiences of libraries, drawing special attention to the emotional, intellectual, and social ways libraries have encouraged community dialogue and helped everyday individuals make sense of their lives. My own work attempts to build upon Wiegand’s findings by examining library visitors not only as *users* but also as *leaders*. Indeed, users fascinate us because of the diversity of materials they consume; the joy, meaning, and personal growth they derive from doing so; and the pressures they have applied in compelling libraries to include various books, services, and people. Yet while public libraries are great examples of “cultural democracy in action,” the more mundane, less contentious contributions of everyday citizens to public library development have received scant scholarly attention.¹⁶ American works often begin with the founding of the American Library Association (1876), emphasize the contributions of career librarians, and do not utilize archival collections of non-library enti-

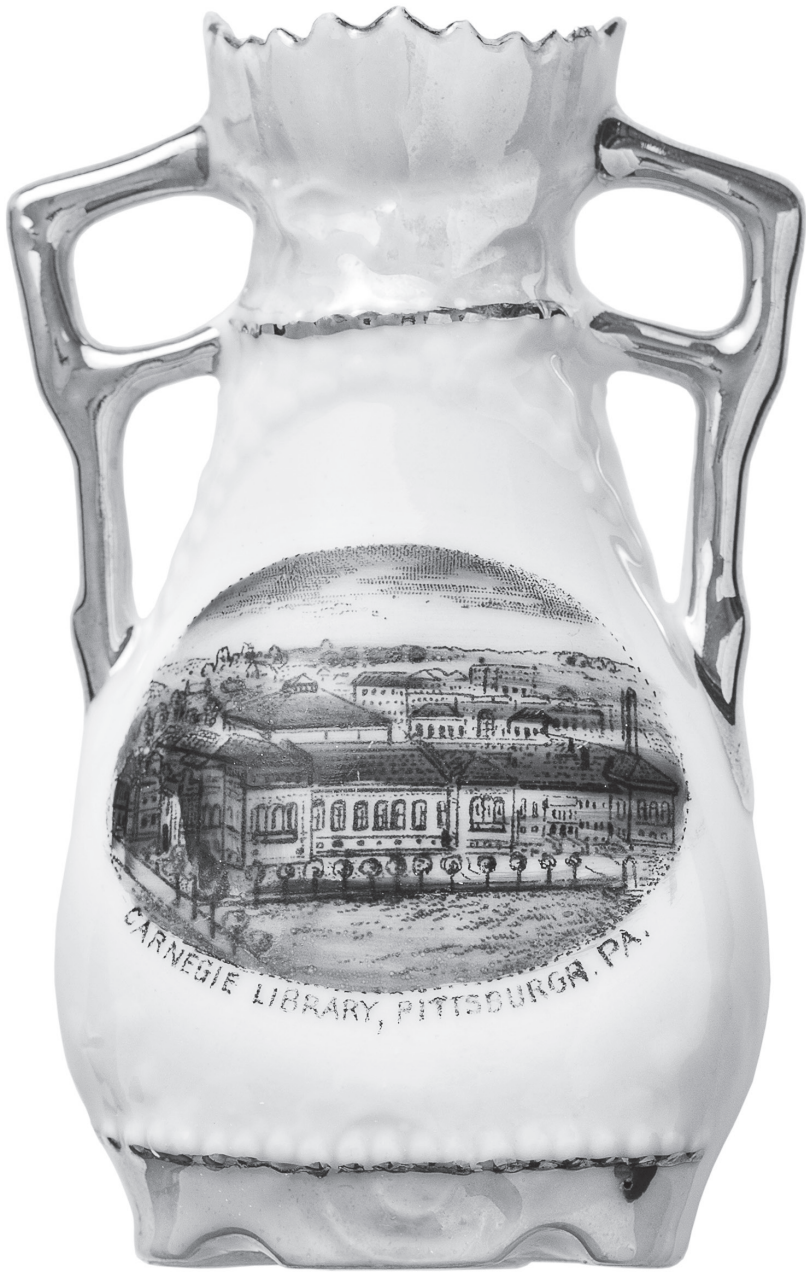


FIGURE I.1: Small vase commemorating Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, ca. 1910. Cups, plates, silver spoons, and other souvenir items were often produced to celebrate public library openings. Vase from the author's collection. Photo by Jason Langheine.

ties that were significant contributors. Users (or would-be users) are often portrayed as either an obstinate or an ever-grateful force, not as partners. While professionals' importance in the extension of literacy, information access, and cultural programming is undeniable, this book seeks to spotlight collaborative library users—donors, trustees, volunteers, governments, and civic organizations—without which the current library landscape, at least in Pennsylvania, would not exist. Libraries in the Keystone State made their greatest strides when activist library users and career librarians worked together.

While humanities and library history scholars will glean new insights from *Made Free*, my hope is that my work will be useful to practicing librarians, library advocates, government officials, and other readers as well. Even though *Made Free* concludes around 1945, many of the structures, features, and problems it describes continue to persist. As I chronicle in subsequent chapters, library establishment continues to follow settlement patterns, as it did in the colonial era. Evolving state law, shifting demographics, new forms of transportation, and other external factors still impact public libraries. Contemporary libraries' varying corporate structures are attributable to a morass of legislation from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many institutions still bear the names of turn-of-the-century donors. Nearly all public libraries, both in the early 1900s and today, highlight their reference services and children's programming. In strengthening book collections, libraries often partner with local businesses and community organizations, as they did a hundred years ago. Libraries provide shelter to the displaced, as they did during the Great Depression. They also respond, as they did during World War I and World War II, to national emergencies. Similarly, the library profession continues to be dominated by women, many of whom are poorly paid relative to their advanced training. Most importantly of all, Pennsylvania continues to have millions of avid library users—even while those libraries still rely on an insufficient patchwork of state, county, local, and private subsidies in order to keep their doors open. The good will of their constituents has been, and continues to be, libraries' greatest strength. Maintaining and increasing that support has been a constant challenge.

Each chapter in *Made Free* underscores the importance of broader historical trends and nonprofessional actors in Pennsylvania's library development, while focusing on topics that continue to affect today's institutions and services. Chapter 1, "Libraries from the Colonial Era through the 1880s," begins with an exploration of the influences of physical and cultural geogra-

phy on Pennsylvania's libraries. I describe how libraries began in southeastern Pennsylvania and generally spread west and north, following settlement patterns. I also attempt to explain why Pennsylvanians have often taken a less-idealistic approach to libraries, and why the Keystone State developed so many institutions to serve relatively small geographic areas. I then describe the various subscription-based institutions that appeared from the mid-1700s through the late 1800s, including proprietary, social, mechanics, YMCA, and other libraries. While residents devised ingenious ways of establishing and supporting these enterprises, many were short-lived, succumbing to a lack of financial support and to volunteers' exhaustion. Opening hours and collections were limited, and early libraries often served upper- and middle-class urban men far more than rural residents, the poor, women, or children.

Significant change required new funding streams, and in chapter 2, "From Subscription Libraries to Free Public Institutions," I examine relevant state laws that enabled public libraries to pursue them. Throughout the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth centuries, nonprofit enterprises were organized as corporations rather than as government agencies. Neither state nor local government assumed responsibility for them. However, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Pennsylvania legislature began to authorize school districts, municipalities, and counties (in that order) to establish and maintain libraries. Unfortunately, the extent of local power was often pegged to a jurisdiction's incorporation status and population size. Thus, cities, boroughs, and townships could not support libraries to the same extent. While this situation was corrected with the passage of Act 398 in 1917, the legislation allowed a variety of organizational structures and funding mechanisms to persist, explaining much of the institutional diversity we see today. I also explore individual giving, from Andrew Carnegie and thousands of smaller donors, whose generosity enabled libraries to transcend limitations of public funding. I also describe debates over the elections of trustees, relaxation of borrowing rules, open access to book stacks, the inclusion of controversial materials, and other issues that came to the fore as large numbers of residents began to use libraries.

In chapter 3, "Professionalization," I describe the development of a distinct occupation around the function of providing wholesome reading materials, reliable information, and an uplifting literary environment to the general public. This movement involved heated discussions about the role of fiction in communities' moral and social development. It also resulted in models for libraries' physical spaces, best practices for technical processing

of library materials, and field-tested tactics for handling patron behaviors. I include details about Pennsylvania's early interactions with the American Library Association (ALA) as well as the establishment of the Keystone State Library Association (KSLA, later renamed the Pennsylvania Library Association [PaLA]). I also describe the State Library of Pennsylvania's growing role in library development. Because few public librarians were educated through the degree programs that emerged at Drexel, in Pittsburgh, and elsewhere, I illustrate other efforts to increase library employees' proficiency. Over time, the demographics of librarianship in the Keystone State evolved from predominantly male and eclectically educated, to predominantly female and professionally trained. This cadre of library women significantly enhanced communities' abilities to encourage literacy while they often reinforced the social prejudices and inequities of the time.

In chapter 4, "Outreach: General Themes and Urban Contexts," I begin with an exploration of women's involvement in Pennsylvania public libraries. While the topic could be meaningfully addressed in every chapter, it is particularly relevant during the early twentieth century, when females entered the library profession in large numbers and when women's clubs emerged as significant supporters. I describe Pennsylvania women's influences as founders, donors, trustees, organizers, employees, advocates, and users, making the important point that libraries were able to grow as much as they did because of females' poorly compensated labor. I then explore the diverse collections and services that arose. In large municipalities that provided annual appropriations or levies, library branches were established in different wards so that taxpayers would be served. In other cities, especially those in which school districts contributed to library budgets, librarians collaborated with local educators, deposited books in classrooms, and established branches within school buildings. Some institutions, in partnership with community organizations, also developed technical, music, art, and other collections. Services to immigrants and to African Americans were slower to develop, however.

In chapter 5, "Extension to Suburban and Rural Communities," I describe circumstances that made libraries newly possible in outlying areas during the early twentieth century. Commuter rail services delivered larger populations to suburbs. Emerging women's clubs, Rotaries, Kiwanis, Lions, and other organizations chose libraries as service projects. At the same time, people in more isolated locations demanded educational, recreational, and social opportunities similar to those of their urban counterparts. Encouraged by the Pennsylvania State Grange, farmers took advantage of the Penn-

sylvania Free Library Commission's traveling library program. In 1931 their influence led to state funding for county libraries through a formula that favored small jurisdictions. While rural Pennsylvanians often voted against tax levies, they often supported public libraries through significant volunteerism. I offer case studies to illustrate the "strong municipal" and "strong county" models that emerged as a result.

In chapter 6, "Responding to National Emergencies," I argue that World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II prompted Pennsylvania's public libraries to embrace nonresidential patrons and to do so in new ways. Leaders within the ALA and KSLA/PaLA viewed World War I and World War II as opportunities for demonstrating libraries' value in times of national crisis and within evolving societies. At the associations' urging, libraries provided access to information and propaganda from the Committee on Public Information (World War I) and the Office of War Information (World War II). They participated in Books for Soldiers and the Victory Book Campaign, two nationwide efforts to collect reading material for enlistees. Moving beyond their customary roles, Pennsylvania libraries promoted Americanization and patriotic education, bond sales, draft registration, public safety, and the social/emotional well-being of wartime communities. During the Great Depression, they offered means of escape for millions who were suffering from "enforced leisure." Also, through the Works Progress Administration and other relief programs, libraries offered much-needed jobs. I conclude chapter 6 with a brief description of the library landscape in the mid-1940s and beyond. By the end of World War II, about six million Pennsylvanians had access to free public libraries; however, three to four million remained unserved. Nearly every institution in the Keystone State was grossly underfunded. While *Made Free* ends in 1945, the challenge to provide recreational reading, trustworthy information, and other opportunities to all Pennsylvanians continues.