

Public Libraries in the US

Early investment by Andrew Carnegie, coupled with long-running advocacy by interest groups, has provided 96 percent of Americans with easy access to free libraries.

Public libraries are a ubiquitous element of American society that made knowledge and literature widely accessible to people of all incomes and locations long before the advent of the internet, but they were almost unheard of prior to the mid-1800s. Yet in 2011, 65 percent of American households reported visiting their local public library in the previous year, and in 2013 over 96 percent of Americans reported having access to public library service.

How did this public resource become ubiquitous? In 1656 the idea of public access to books first glimmered in the United States when a Boston merchant willed to the town his private collection. But it wasn't until 1833 that Peterborough, NH, became the first US town to fund a library through taxation. Boston copied this sustainable model in 1848, and thereafter a small number of other towns and cities followed. By 1887, towns and cities in 20 states housed a total of 649 public libraries. But the high cost to construct the buildings became a barrier to more widespread growth. While many localities could furnish books and operate the libraries, they lacked the capital required for the initial construction. In the face of this challenge, five new libraries built in Baltimore in 1886 by merchant and financier Enoch Pratt offered an interesting model

This case study is part of a series that accompanies The Bridgespan Group article “Audacious Philanthropy: Lessons from 15 World-Changing Initiatives” (*Harvard Business Review*, Sept/Oct 2017). See below for 15 stories of social movements that defied the odds and learn how philanthropy played a role in achieving their life-changing results.

- [The Anti-Apartheid Movement](#)
- [Aravind Eye Hospital](#)
- [Car Seats](#)
- [CPR Training](#)
- [The Fair Food Program](#)
- [Hospice and Palliative Care](#)
- [Marriage Equality](#)
- [Motorcycle Helmets in Vietnam](#)
- [The National School Lunch Program](#)
- [911 Emergency Services](#)
- [Oral Rehydration](#)
- [Polio Eradication](#)
- [Public Libraries](#)
- [Sesame Street](#)
- [Tobacco Control](#)

of public-private partnership to address this challenge: Pratt built and endowed a central library and four branches on the condition that the City of Baltimore would pay for ongoing operating expenses.

Pratt's model inspired Andrew Carnegie, who attributed some of his success in life to his access as a child to a neighbor's private library. As a result, Carnegie spent much of his philanthropic fortune expanding free access to libraries across the country based on this model, requiring that a city that requested he build a library also commit to support its operating expenses through public funds. To fairly serve demand, Carnegie created a formula of \$2 (\$51 in 2017 dollars) donated per resident of a town or city requesting a library. From 1886 to 1920, Carnegie gave \$60 million (\$1.6 billion in 2017 dollars) to construct 1,679 libraries in 1,406 US communities, along with another 830 abroad.

Philanthropy's Role in Large-Scale Social Change

Our research shows that breakthrough social initiatives share a set of [five practical approaches to large-scale change](#). In the case of public libraries, philanthropy fueled three of them:

- **Craft an emotionally compelling “winnable milestone”:** Carnegie was a turn-of-the-century celebrity. His work to champion the cause of local library access for all, to enable self-improvement, helped to generate public support nationwide. Carnegie's work was highlighted by newspaper articles as well as his own famous essay, *The Gospel of Wealth*. During the 20th century, the American Library Association (ALA) refined the message and gave it teeth, regularly measuring and publicly highlighting how many people remained underserved by libraries, a very clear and concrete metric that helped rally support.
- **Design for massive scale at the outset:** The Pratt/Carnegie philanthropic approach of paying for library buildings in exchange for long-term operational support from municipal government set up a scalable, sustainable funding model. It formed the basis for both Carnegie's unprecedented giving, as well as later funding from the federal government (e.g., almost \$200 million per year from the Library Services and Construction Act when it was passed in the mid-1960s).
- **Drive demand, don't assume it:** News of Carnegie's early funding of library buildings, especially New York City branch libraries, received wide attention and drove tremendous demand from other towns. Later, the ALA (supported by membership, meetings, publishing, and private donations) became the major lobbying force for public libraries in the 20th century. The organization has always designed and adapted its advocacy to fit the times—including for decades delivering statistics about Americans underserved by libraries. For the first National Library Week in April 1958, the ALA enlisted President Dwight D. Eisenhower to champion the cause.

When Carnegie ceased giving in 1920, there were about 4,000 US library buildings, representing one for every 26,000 Americans. When the Great Depression hit, limited funding caused some library branches to close or limit their services. However, the Depression also brought a new wave of demand for free access to education. Harnessing this energy, the nonprofit American Library Association (ALA) became determined to mobilize the government to continue expanding access to libraries. Over the 1940s and 1950s, the ALA worked with dozens of unions and crafted countless reports until President Dwight D. Eisenhower finally signed the Library Services Act in 1956, which provided an annual appropriation of \$7.5 million (\$67 million in 2017 dollars) to support the expansion of libraries. Since that time, government funding has continued to help expand the geographic reach and effectiveness of libraries. Today, there are nearly 17,000 public library branches across the United States, and a local public library is seen as one of the foundational pillars of every community in the country.

Researched and written by Consultant Phil Dearing of The Bridgespan Group, based on a Bridgespan interview with Karen Muller, librarian and knowledge management specialist for the ALA Library, as well as selected sources.

Selected Sources

- American Library Association. "ALA Library Fact Sheet: Number of Libraries in the United States." <http://www.ala.org/tools/libfactsheets/alalibraryfactsheet01>.
- Bobinski, George S. *Carnegie Libraries: Their History and Impact on American Public Library Development*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1969.
- Farrell, Michele. "A Brief History of National Support for Libraries in the United States." Paper presented at the 78th IFLA General Conference and Assembly, Helsinki, Finland, August 2012.
- Fry, James W. "LSA and LSCA, 1956-1973: A Legislative History." *Library Trends* 24 (1975): 7-26.
- Institute of Museum and Library Services. "Public Libraries Survey." <https://www.ims.gov/research-evaluation/data-collection/public-libraries-survey>.
- Johnson, Elmer D, and Michael Harris. *History of Libraries in the Western World*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1999.
- Kevane, Michael, and William A. Sundstrom. "State Promotion of Local Public Goods: The Case of Public Libraries, 1880-1929." Working Paper, 2012. eh.net/eha/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Baileyetal.pdf.
- Nasaw, David. *Andrew Carnegie*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2006.
- National Park Service Teaching with Historic Lesson Plans. *Carnegie Libraries: The Future Made Bright*. <https://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/50carnegie/50carnegie.htm>.
- National Philanthropic Trust. "A History of Modern Philanthropy." <http://www.historyofgiving.org/>.
- Stamberg, Susan. "How Andrew Carnegie Turned His Fortune Into A Library Legacy." *NPR Morning Edition*. <http://www.npr.org/2013/08/01/207272849/how-andrew-carnegie-turned-his-fortune-into-a-library-legacy>.
- Stevenson, Siobhan. "The Political Economy of Andrew Carnegie's Library Philanthropy, with a Reflection on its Relevance to the Philanthropic Work of Bill Gates." *Library & Information History* 26 (2010): 237-257.
- Zickuhr, Kathryn, Lee Rainie, Kristen Purcell, and Maeve Duggan. "How Americans Value Public Libraries in Their Communities." Pew Internet & American Life Project, December 11, 2013. <http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2013/12/11/section-1-an-overview-of-americans-public-library-use/>.

THE BRIDGESPAN GROUP

BOSTON 2 Copley Place, 7th Floor, Suite 3700B, Boston, MA 02116 USA. Tel: +1 617 572 2833

NEW YORK 112 West 34th St., Ste. 1510, New York, NY 10120 USA. Tel: +1 646 562 8900

SAN FRANCISCO 465 California St., 11th Floor, San Francisco, CA 94104 USA. Tel: +1 415 627 1100

MUMBAI Bridgespan India Private Limited Company, 1086, Regus, Level 1, Trade Centre, Bandra Kurla Complex, Bandra East, Mumbai, 400051 Maharashtra, India. Tel: +91 2266289639



www.bridgespan.org

contact@bridgespan.org