

The History of Libraries

You have probably visited the library many times. It is a place where we find and borrow books, useful materials, computers, and reference literature.

The library has changed over time. Originally, the library housed only books.



These days, it is a public facility where individuals can access other types of media that we use to store information; such as maps, prints, documents, magazines and newspapers, books, as well as audiotapes, CDs, cassettes, videos, DVDs and other reference materials. Libraries are also places where the public can access the Internet.

Libraries have been a part of society for a long time. During the Persian Empire (558-330 BC) and ancient Rome and Greece, archives were kept in libraries. The books would have been in the fields of philosophy, medicine, astronomy and sciences. These libraries were often private. Public libraries became popular during the Roman Empire – and each succeeding emperor attempted to open a library that was greater than the one before! Libraries were filled with scrolls.

Before there were public libraries in the United States, there were small, private libraries. A public library is publicly owned and supported by the government through taxes, includes a wide range of material, and is open to any citizen who wishes to become a member. So, in the 1700s, before there were public libraries, there were private libraries. These would have been belonging to specific people, or organizations such as churches and colleges. These libraries would have been quite small and may have only had material on specific subjects. Books were not catalogued and were not preserved in a special manner. Books were expensive, and symbolized wealth and

education. College libraries began to grow in the late 1600s. One of the first examples of this is when the Reverend John Harvard gave a small college nearly 300 books as a gift. The college took his name (Harvard) and is still one of the country's top schools.

In 1731, Franklin Roosevelt opened the first "subscription library" as a way of sharing his books with members of a literary society. In 1742, it became incorporated as the Library Company of Philadelphia, and individuals could purchase stock in the company. The trend of private libraries continued, with individuals (who were mostly wealthy and scholarly) purchasing memberships in exchange for being allowed to borrow books. Soon, another type of library was born: "Circulating libraries," which allowed individuals to rent out books. Next, "School District Libraries," became popular, offering literature for students. Eventually, all three types of libraries blended together to create libraries that shared books, included a wide range of materials, and were publicly funded.

In the 1800s, libraries became more popular, and The Boston Public Library opened in 1854, and is considered by most to be the nation's first real public library.

In the United States, a man named Melvil Dewey, who was born in 1851 in New York State, founded the profession of "librarian." He invented the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) system when he was 21 years old, and is regarded as "The Father of Modern Librarianship." His classification system is the most widely used method of organization library materials in the world.

Today, there are over 9000 libraries in the USA, plus another 8,000 smaller branches.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Multiple Choice Questions

Circle the correct answer.

1. Originally, libraries only housed:
 - a. Books
 - b. Music
 - c. Scholars
 - d. Type-writers

2. True or False: Today, we can borrow many items from the library, including CDs, DVDs, and other reference materials.
 - a. True
 - b. False

3. During the Roman Empire, libraries were filled with:
 - a. Bathing Houses
 - b. Food and Wine
 - c. Scrolls
 - d. Exotic creatures and animals

4. Which of the following was NOT a subject that might have been found in Roman and Greek Libraries?
 - a. Medicine
 - b. Philosophy
 - c. Celebrities & Fashion
 - d. Science

5. Which of the following phrases is true:
 - a. Milton Dewey was born in 1951 in the state of California.
 - b. Milton Dewey was born in 1851 in the state of New York.
 - c. Milton Dewey was born in 1841 in the state of New York.
 - d. Milton Dewey was born in 1922 in the state of Vermont.

6. Who opened the first "subscription library"?
 - a. Thomas Jefferson
 - b. Robert Kennedy
 - c. Bill Clinton
 - d. Franklin Roosevelt

7. The Boston Public Library opened in the year:
 - a. 1654
 - b. 1754
 - c. 1854
 - d. 1954

Name: _____ Date: _____

Short Answer Questions

1. What did Melvil Dewey invent? Explain.
2. List the three types of libraries that arose in the 1700s.
3. What was one of the elements that helped Harvard to become a success in its early days?
4. Imagine you are an individual in Philadelphia in the year 1744 and you want to join a library. What would you need to do?
5. What did books used to symbolize?
6. Do you believe they still symbolize this? Why or why not?
7. What is considered to be our nation's first public library, and in what year did it open?
8. Do you visit the library very often? What do you like to borrow from the library?

ANSWER KEY:

Multiple Choice:

1. A
2. A
3. C
4. C
5. B
6. D
7. C

Short Answer:

1. He invented the Dewey decimal classification system, which is a system of organizing library materials.
2. Subscription libraries, Circulating Libraries, and School District Libraries.
3. Reverend John Harvard gave the small college nearly 300 books as a gift.
4. You would need to purchase stocks in the Philadelphia Library Company.
5. Books used to symbolize wealth and education.
6. Individual Response.
7. The Boston Public Library, which opened in 1854.
8. Individual Response.