THE LIBRARY IN AMERICA

DICKSON

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A Celebration in Words and Pictures

by

PAUL DICKSON

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A Celebration in Words and Pictures

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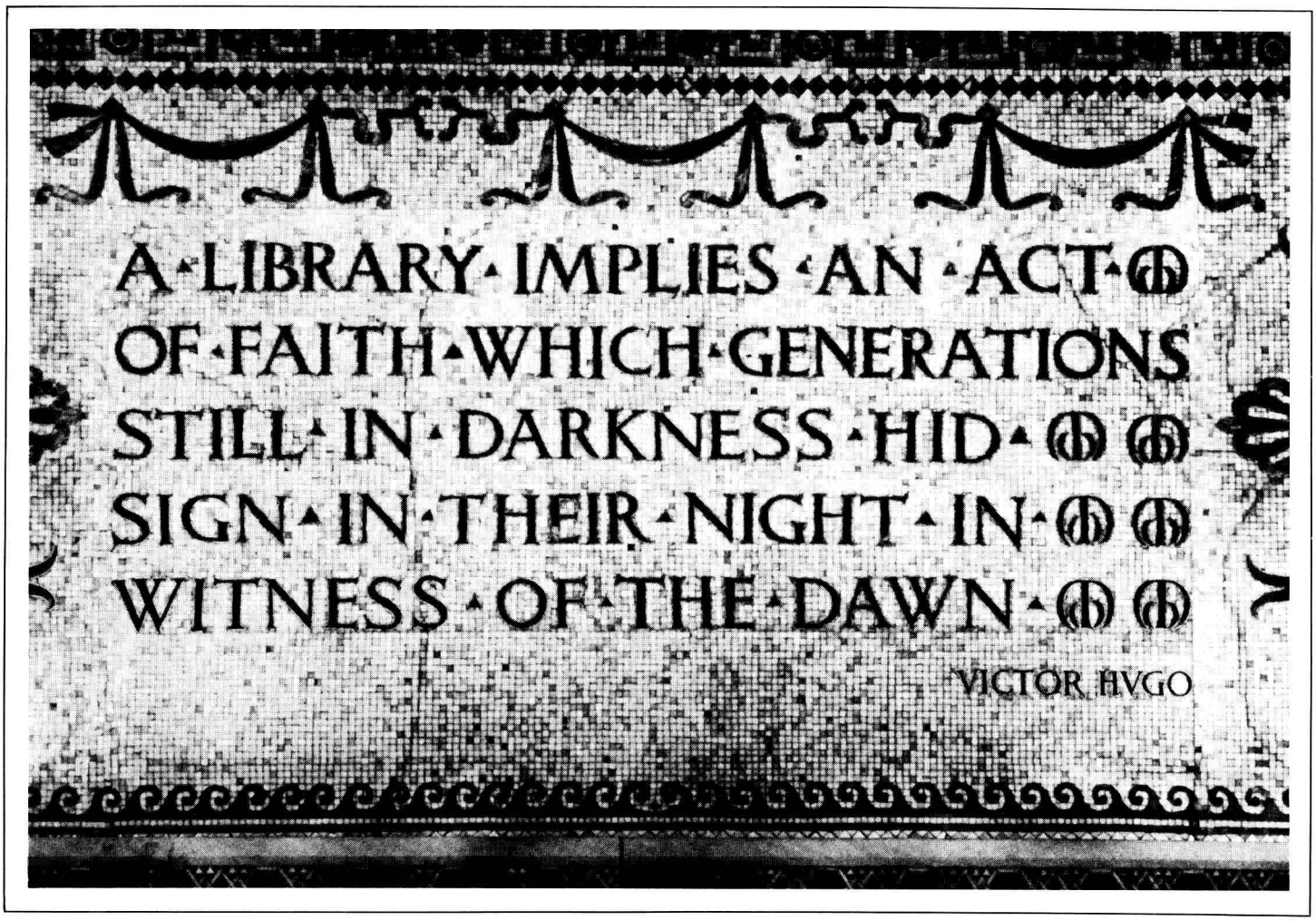
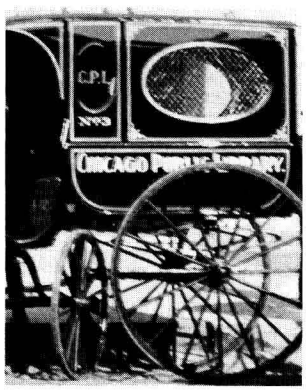
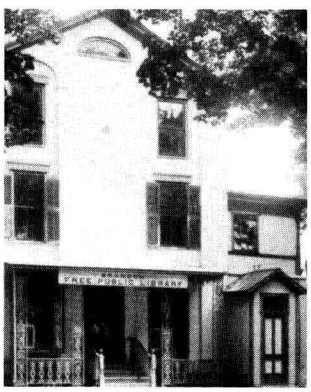
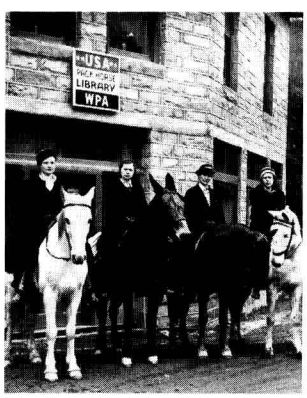
Dedicated
to the professionals and volunteers
who made all of this possible
with a special nod to those workaday librarians
who are always helping us,
but who we seldom take time to thank

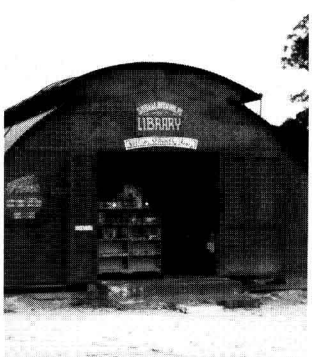
Mural Inscription at the Chicago Public Library Cultural Center

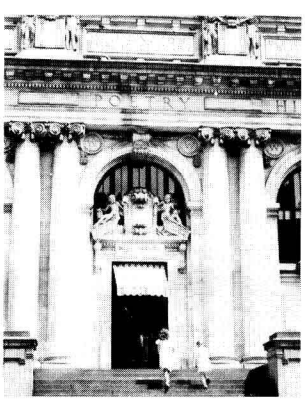


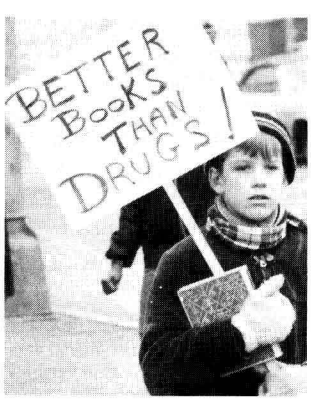


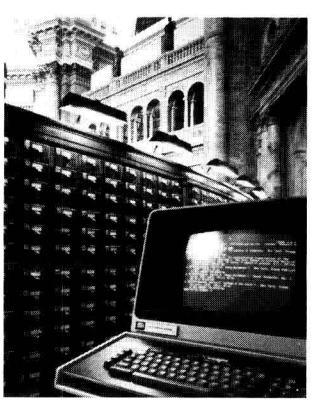












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There are numerous men and women perambulating the earth—in appearance much like ordinary respectable citizens—who have warm, loving, passionate—even sensuous—feelings about libraries. . . .

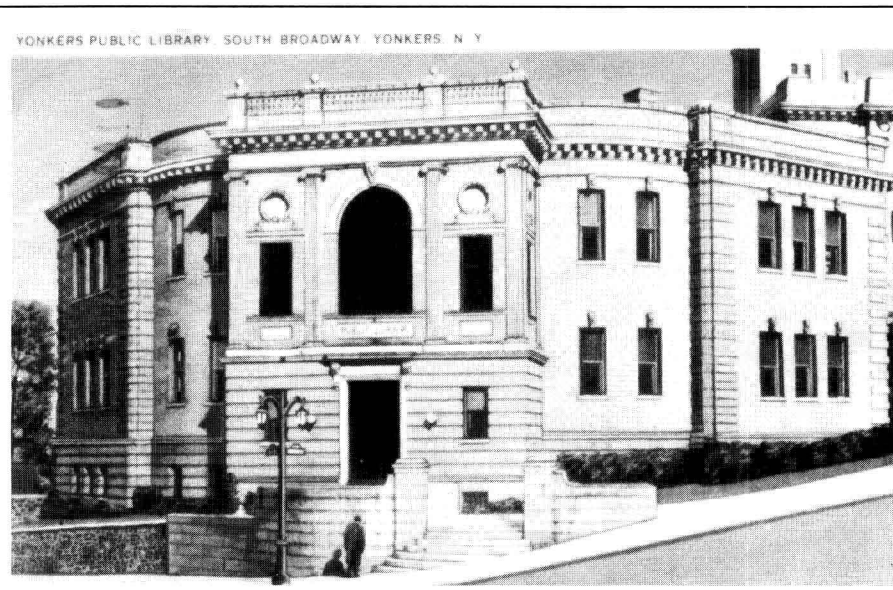
—Elinor Lander Horwitz, writing in *The Washington Star*, November 15, 1970

The affliction lacks a proper name, but a lot of us have it and most of us are not looking for a cure. It is the passion for libraries.

Mine began to stir in the 1940s at the old Carnegie Public Library in Yonkers, New York, which to this kid was the most important and impressive place in town. It sat on the side of a hill and had an odd, elliptical shape to accommodate its position. A quirky set of offset, hillside steps got you into the place, which always seemed at its most inviting on the coldest and hottest days. It was as if it was warmed in the winter by its shell of bright yellow brick—it looked like a lemon Beaux Arts birthday cake—and cooled in the summer by the tons of white marble that covered the inside. The grand staircase led up to a juvenile department that seemed to catch a particular slant of sunlight from the oversized second-story windows. The lightfall moved across the room as the afternoon wore on, and you could get a pretty good idea of what time it was getting to be by looking down at the floor.

Later I took my business downstairs to the Young Adult Room, where there were no story hours or puppet shows and where the books all seemed to have dark bindings, ranging in tone from plum to prune. One day when I couldn't find what I wanted in "YA," which was how all the books there were marked, I was sent to the reference room, where it seemed that all the information in the world must be stored. It was here, for example, that I became fascinated with facts such as that even dentists and librarians had patron saints (St. Apollonia and St. Jerome, respectively) and that the first recorded unassisted triple play in baseball was made by Paul Hines in 1878.

INTRODUCTION



The Carnegie Library in Yonkers. As it appeared in a postcard of the 1940s. (Author's collection)

Despite a late attempt by local preservationists to save it, the wrecking ball took the place away about four years ago so the street could be widened. In 1980 the library had moved into a refurbished department store a few blocks away and lives on in spirit if not in the same style.

I mourn the loss of the old building for a strictly personal reason: I'd like to be able to go back there from time to time and catch the light in the children's room or dwell in the reference room long enough to find a book that told me *how* Paul Hines got his one-man triple play. (This is small consolation, but it was the library used in the library scenes in the 1969 film *Goodbye Columbus,* so I can still get to see it once in a blue moon—see page 181.)

But it is gone, and I can thank it for giving me that passion for books and libraries, which is now in an advanced stage.

My symptoms are not atypical. I am fascinated by the romance, lore, and culture of American libraries. I am a self-confessed library buff, drawn to them like others are drawn to theaters, art galleries, bars, or football games. I am proud to say that I have more library cards than credit cards in my wallet and that I know where all the coffee machines are located at

the Library of Congress. I think a run to the library can salvage an otherwise blah day, and I was shocked recently when a well-known writer on the subject of personal computers opened his syndicated column by saying that he was looking for a data base that would save him "trips to the library."

If I have two hours to kill in a strange city I will prowl the local library looking for that which sets it apart, whether it be the fantastic automotive collection at the Detroit Public Library, the collection of early English humor at the main Cincinnati Library, the H. L. Mencken room at the Enoch Pratt Library in Baltimore, or the Western Americana collection at the library in Fryeburg, Maine (this last being the gift of Clarence Mumford, creator of Hopalong Cassidy, who spent most of his life in Fryeburg).

I have fallen in love with several libraries. The special library at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y., is one. I once got to spend a blissful three days there "working" on a project. Another is a collection at the San Francisco Public Library called the Schmulowitz Collection of Wit and Humor (SCOWAH). It is the world's largest collection of humor, containing 17,000 books and many magazines. To the humor lover, it is the Louvre and Sistine Chapel rolled into one. The late Nate Schmulowitz, a lawyer, put the collection together to rectify the fact that few major libraries ever really collected humor.

I have visited a library in Clearwater, Florida, that was so small that it could not be called a branch but a twig. The Clearwater East Twig Library recently closed, to be replaced by a proper branch, but I will cherish the memory of that glorified broom closet and its charming name.

I am totally infatuated with the small country libraries that are still vital community centers and points of local pride, despite shoestring budgets. While traveling, I will invent the most preposterous excuses—"Oh my gosh! I've forgotten the name of Warren Harding's vice president, and it's driving me nuts"—to justify stopping in a small-town library to drink in its special atmosphere and predilections.

One of my favorites is in the small town of Weld, Maine—a handsome, professionally run, free, public library supported solely by its population of 320 people. It is open only three days a week and, yes, it has *Megatrends* among its collection of nearly 10,000 books.

The reason for this book is that I had been looking for a way to celebrate this fascination and translate it into something tangible. I began looking after reading an article in the *New York Times* on the failing campaign to save *my* old library in Yonkers from the road wideners.

I wanted to do something that would dramatize the fact that America has created the best collection of public libraries in the world. They can hardly be called a system since their individual policies, plans, and close to 80 percent of their funding comes from local sources; yet they work better than most systems. I wanted to show that a lot had gone into the American library movement. I felt that perhaps too many people were taking it all for granted—amid all the fund raisers, bond campaigns, and fights for longer hours and book collections. One day at my local library I listened to a patron complain bitterly about the fact that a mystery novel that had been reviewed in the *Washington Post* had not yet been ordered. The patron stormed off after promising to write an angry letter to the librarian in charge of the county system. All I could think of was that this person, as many of us do from time to time, had lost all perspective on

the public library and the struggle that had gone into creating it. Lest we forget, there is nothing in the Constitution that guarantees us a book on Monday just because it was reviewed in the paper on Sunday.

Along with this lack of perspective, I have been amazed that much of what one gets to read about libraries these days seems to be about the technical aspects of library automation, the agonizing death of the card catalog, fines policies, book thieves, budgetary constraints, or the pressures to ban some book that is offensive to some group. These are all important things but are hardly uplifting, reflective themes.

My plan went through several incarnations, but what finally occurred to me was to reflect on the story of the American public library through pictures—good, solid photographs mixed in with what I will call verbal snapshots. It was not to be an attempt at an all-inclusive history of the library movement but rather a scrapbook of that movement, using imagery that is old but I hope fresh, in that most of it has not been seen anywhere for decades. This notion was made most graphic when my eyes first glimpsed a pack of Works Progress Administration photographs at the National Archives. They were taken in the late 1930s and showed librarians on the backs of horses and mules hauling books up into the hollows of Tennessee. For me, these pictures summoned up the idealism of the time in a way that no government report on the WPA could accomplish.

It is through such pictures that this book is meant to be a valentine to libraries, librarians, and patrons smitten with a passion for libraries.

After some months of photo research, it would appear that American library life has been well-documented, and is being well preserved at such places as the American Library Association Archives at the University of Illinois, the ALA itself, the National Archives, and the Library of Congress. The same can be said for individual libraries, both large and small, some of whose fine collections are credited throughout the book.

For all of this, however, there are some big blunders being committed by libraries. It would not do to name names in a valentine, but the public relations director for one large urban system told me that all the event and publicity photographs having to do with the library before 1980 had been disposed of—I was too cowardly to ask how—because they were taking up too much room. I was told by a librarian who had recently gotten rid of several file folders of photographs that I would not have been interested in them anyway because they were "old and obsolete." An administrator for another large system told me on the morning we had an appointment to see her institution's picture collection that she had just been informed that the collection was "off limits" to the public.

I hope that the pictures used in this book reflect well on the photographers who took them, on the subjects themselves, and on the people who have preserved them. If nothing else, I hope it has a visual impact that will prevent any other institution from tossing out images just to make room in the files. I would also like to make the modest proposal that at some time soon an effort should be launched to make sure that elements of this visual history not be pitched and at least be offered to the ALA Archives rather than the nearest dumpster.

PAUL DICKSON

Garrett Park, Maryland
Spring 1986

BEGINNINGS OF THE MOVEMENT

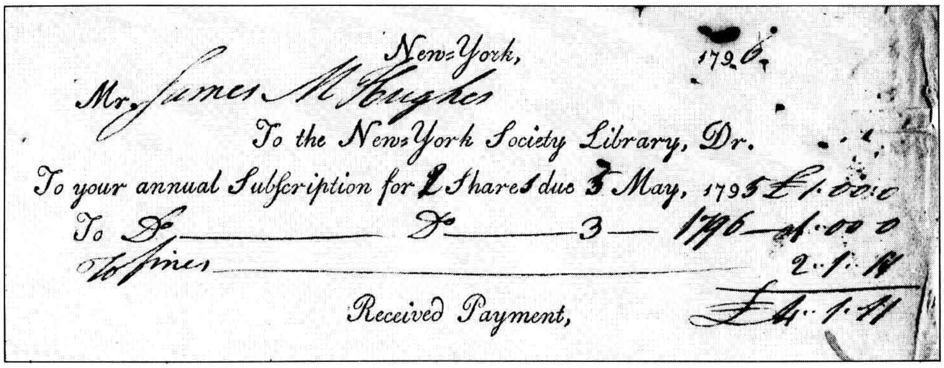
The first library in America was founded in 1638 at Harvard University. A few churches also established small parish libraries in the colonial period, but these had little effect on the average man.

As did so many other things in America, libraries got their start with the help of Benjamin Franklin. Finding that books were expensive and hard to get hold of in colonial Philadelphia, Franklin hit on the idea of pooling the resources of a number of young men, who banded together in 1731 to start a subscription library, the Philadelphia Library Company. The pattern established by that group was followed again and again. These social libraries were not public libraries but rather their forerunners.

CONTENTS

ONE

Ephemera Established by 140 well-to-do New Yorkers, the Society Library was founded in 1754. It was an important early subscription library which, according to a newspaper ad from 1763, featured "several Thousand Volumes of Choice Books, in History, Divinity, Travels, Voyages, Novels, &c." Shown here are *(right)* a receipt given to a member for 1796 and an important NOTICE. (The Smithsonian)



New-York, 1796.

Mr. James McHughes

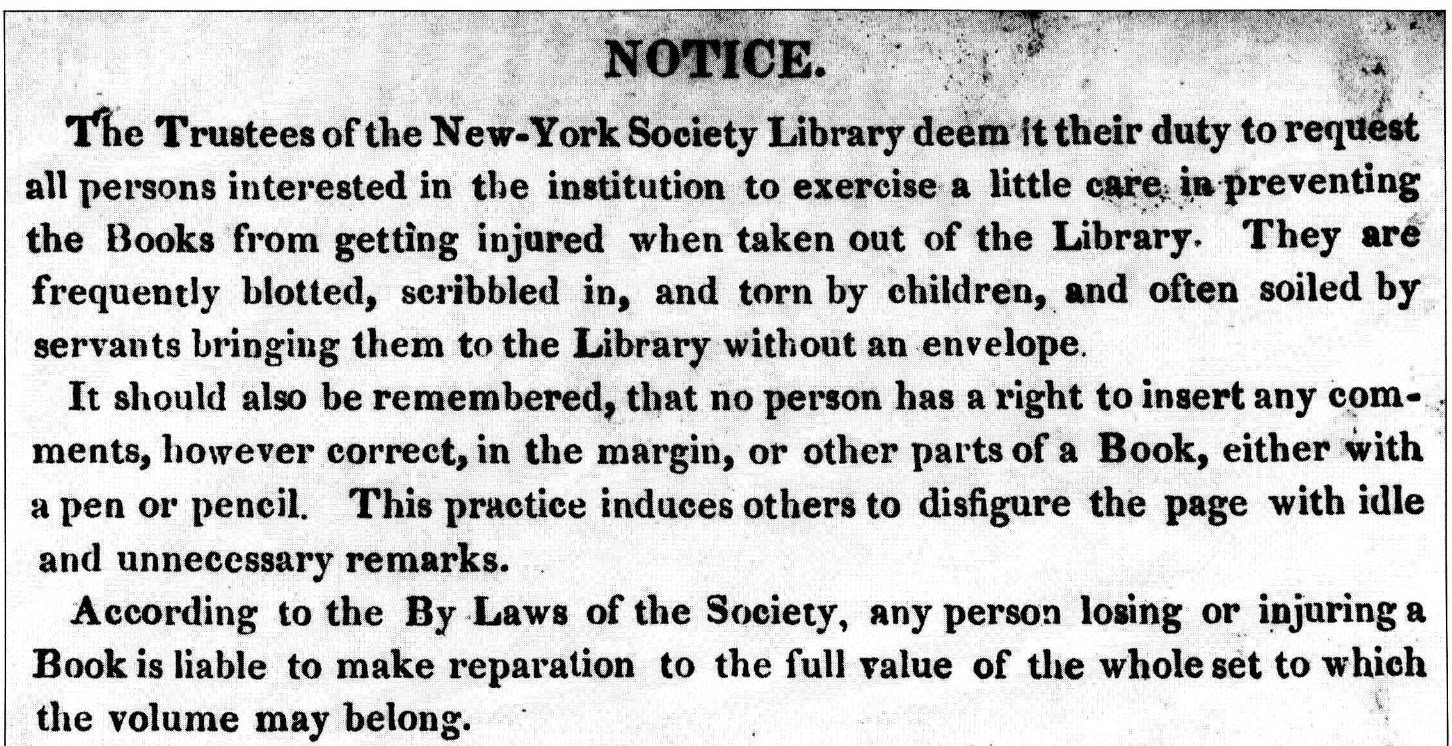
To the New-York Society Library, Dr.

To your annual Subscription for 2 Shares due 3 May, 1795 £1.0.0

To Do —— Do —— 3 —— 1796 —— £1.0.0

To fines —— 2.1.11

Received Payment, £4.1.11



NOTICE.

The Trustees of the New-York Society Library deem it their duty to request all persons interested in the institution to exercise a little care in preventing the Books from getting injured when taken out of the Library. They are frequently blotted, scribbled in, and torn by children, and often soiled by servants bringing them to the Library without an envelope.

It should also be remembered, that no person has a right to insert any comments, however correct, in the margin, or other parts of a Book, either with a pen or pencil. This practice induces others to disfigure the page with idle and unnecessary remarks.

According to the By Laws of the Society, any person losing or injuring a Book is liable to make reparation to the full value of the whole set to which the volume may belong.

THE IMPACT OF FRANKLIN'S LIBRARY 1731

The year 1731 began a new era in the intellectual life of the American people, an era of co-operation for the procurement of books. It was in that year that Benjamin Franklin, because he was a lover of books and because books were so rare and expensive that they could only be obtained with great difficulty, proposed to the Junto, a half-social, half-literary society, of which he was a member, that they bring their books to the club, where they might be enjoyed by all. The result was the formation of the Philadelphia Library Company—"the mother of all North American subscription libraries."

The foundation of this library was the beginning of an epoch in the library history, not only of this country, but of the world. It was not until twenty-five years later that the first subscription library was established in England—that of Liverpool, in 1756; so that the position which America holds today at the head of all matters pertaining to library advancement and usefulness is a trust direct from the liberty-loving founders of the Republic. It is perhaps significant that this movement for the free use of books owes its origin to the so-called middle class, to the manual laborer rather than the professional man, for Franklin and his friends who subscribed to the stock of the company were mechanics and tradesmen. The library was created, not for the use of the scholar, or the rich, or any one class, but for those people who could not win their way to books through the medium of position or money. Franklin's very simple but hitherto un-thought-of device was a new and radical departure. Its effect was toward a more even distribution of intellectual wealth, the establishment, so to speak, of an intellectual democracy.

Franklin's idea, that of the joint stock library association, was contagious. Naturally adopted first in and about Philadelphia, its territory was soon limited only by the frontiers of the country. Before the first shot of the Revolution was fired at Lexington, the seed of library co-operation had taken firm root and pushed its way through the soil of bookish exclusiveness. The library of the Carpenter's Company, Philadelphia, was founded in 1735; Proprietor's library, Pomfret, Conn., 1737; library of the Four Monthly Meetings of Friends, Philadelphia, 1742; Redwood Library, Newport, R.I., 1747: Charleston (S.C.) Library Society, 1748; the curious revolving library which travelled between the first and second parishes in Kittery and York, Me., 1751; Providence Library, united in 1856 with the Providence Athenaeum, 1753; New York Society library, now numbering more than ninety thousand volumes, 1754; Union library, Hatborough, Penn., 1755; library of the Winyaw Indigo Society of Georgetown, S.C., 1755; New England library, Boston, 1758; Prince library, Boston, 1758; Social library, Salem, Mass., 1760; Social library, Leominster, Mass., 1763; Portland library, 1763; Chester (Pa.) library, 1769; and Social library, Hingham, Mass., 1773.

These libraries represent the chief means of general literary culture open to Americans prior to the Revolutionary War. The idea of the Free public library as it is understood today had not been conceived; but in that third step of library progress, co-operation, the craving for books, opened a new avenue of accessibility, the avenue which was destined in the course of time to broaden into the toil-less highway of practically unrestricted procurement.

—From "The Public Library in the United States," by Joseph Leroy Harrison, which appeared in *The New England Magazine*, August 1894.

Book Burners In August 1814 the British set fire to the U.S. Capitol, destroying among other things the Congressional library. A few days later, ex-President Thomas Jefferson offered to sell his fine library as a replacement. It contained nearly 7,000 volumes and was appraised by Congress at $23,950. Congress appropriated the money but not without some objection. Representative Daniel Webster, among others, voted "Nay." Shown here are *(right)* books from the original Jefferson collection that are still in the Library of Congress and an artist's conception of the burning of the original collection, which uses some artistic license to suggest that the books were actually used to fuel the burning of Congressional furnishings. (Library of Congress)