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Good Libraries Make Good Citizens

by Charles Stanhope

“I cannot live without books.”
—Thomas Jefferson

In a letter written in June 1815, Thomas Jefferson told John Adams how important books were to him in his daily life. Six months before he sent this letter, the U.S. Congress had agreed to purchase his private library to restore the collections of the Library of Congress, which the British burned during their siege of the nation’s capital. Jefferson’s sentiment, perhaps tinged by a bit of wistfulness as he scanned empty library shelves at Monticello, reflected his life-long curiosity.

Jefferson’s words are watchwords for us today. Maine’s public libraries—and libraries across the state of all sizes and types—provide for our citizens’ educational and recreational curiosities. Early in the country’s history, we came to value learning and knowledge. Such knowledge is essential to each of us individually and to the country’s growth and maturity. Madison wrote that “a people who

mean to be their own governours must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.” Students of all ages turn to the libraries planted across the state in cities and small towns, colleges and universities, to find the knowledge that they as good citizens require.

My life’s journey has been through libraries, starting with the wooden boxes of picture books from the school department of my local public library, which were delivered to my kindergarten classroom on Munjoy Hill in Portland. I felt a special privilege to be trusted enough to borrow a book from those boxes to take home to read and share—and return. When a branch of the public library came to my neighborhood, I felt as though the world had arrived on my doorstep. In my first job, I worked at the Portland Public Library, shelving books to earn money for college. I continued to work there during the summers of my undergraduate years at the University of Maine, moving up to work on the circulation desk. Almost without my realizing it, I found myself completing a 35-year career at our magnificent Library of Congress. I am now serving on the board of my local public library in Southwest Harbor. I have become a champion of libraries and of their value in the public commons.

Libraries are at the center of our everyday lives. The structures we built to house them are prominently erected in the middle of our cities and towns. Our

state library, like the Library of Congress, is next to the houses of the legislature in Augusta. Each library building is the community's proud statement of identity and value. Citizens every year reaffirm their library's value and importance by approving municipal budgets and making charitable contributions that support them. Countless hours of volunteer time supplement the programs and services libraries provide.

Libraries are our windows into the past. They preserve our histories and heritage and teach us about our story up to now. Competing ideas live amicably side by side on library shelves. We learn about the accomplishments of our forbears and the challenges they faced and overcame. We celebrate what they invented, designed, engineered, built, painted, performed, wrote. And, libraries are our windows into the future: stimulating our creativity to develop inventions, new designs, new techniques, new canvasses, new books, new poems, new plays, new music.

Libraries are at the heart of our communities. We gather in them to do homework, either from classroom or home-school assignments. Our children get their library cards, and as they grow physically, they also grow intellectually by developing their reading skills and interests. At our libraries, we also learn together at readings, lectures, and performances. Libraries celebrate the arts and are the place where we experience the artistic creations of our children, our friends, and our neighbors. Libraries open their doors to welcome new communities that are growing among us and where citizens-to-be take their first steps. During times of economic stress, the library provides the resources citizens need to learn about job opportunities and to complete job applications and resumes.

Libraries connect us to the world. Through their strong statewide network, Maine libraries collaborate with each other to share their collection items. With their ever-expanding digital technology, libraries are creating digital spaces in which they share their e-resources. Libraries are digitizing their legacy collections to make them more accessible outside the collection walls. Professional library staff help us to sort through the flood of information that responds to our electronic queries to find authentic information.

Libraries need and depend on volunteers. Volunteers serve on boards and committees that strive to sustain and improve library services. They augment paid staff resources, performing a myriad of tasks, and they work on fundraising. All their efforts are eloquent testimony to the value of a library in their lives.

Maine libraries face the same challenges that libraries face everywhere—even the Library of Congress. The most fundamental is fiscal support. In these tight budgetary times, communities and libraries face difficult choices. Supporting libraries is an investment in our future, for our children, most especially. It is also an investment in the quality of life we enjoy. A robust library on the public common is an asset for each of us, for our friends and neighbors, and for our business communities.

Today, echoing Jefferson's sentiment about books, his 21st century citizen successors cannot live without libraries. They are essential components of our lives and our society. We have a personal responsibility to use, support and defend them. 🐉



Charles Stanhope recently retired from his 35-year career at the nation's oldest federal cultural insti-

stitution, the Library of Congress, where he served as assistant chief operating officer on executive matters of congressional, legal, and public affairs. He is vice-chair of the board of the Southwest Harbor Public Library, the current chair of the Maine Arts Commission, and a trustee of the Maine Historical Society.