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Maine Library History

by Melora Norman



From the earliest small private and university libraries of the 1700s to today's high-speed Internet-connected institutions, the history of Maine's libraries mirrors the development of the state and provides a sense of the concerns people had for access to information and education. Melora Norman describes the development of various kinds of libraries in Maine and the opportunities and challenges they have faced over time. She notes that the 20th century was a time of increasing professionalization and standardization in Maine's libraries. During the late 1990s through the present, libraries have been changing dramatically as they shift from a focus on print, reference, and preservation to digital knowledge, discovery, and instruction. 🐉

The soil is rugged, the coast rock-bound, the climate cold, the winters long. But on every hill, as here in our sight, is a church and a school-house, and the long winter evenings give to the snow-bound people ample time in which to digest the lessons of both. Why should not Livermore, as heretofore, pour out from her overflowing treasury men who shall make the world better for their living? The church is here built and rebuilt by the generosity of the Washburns; the school-house, too; and today we have dedicated to the free use of all her citizens this magnificent Library Building, with its treasure of learning, also their gift.

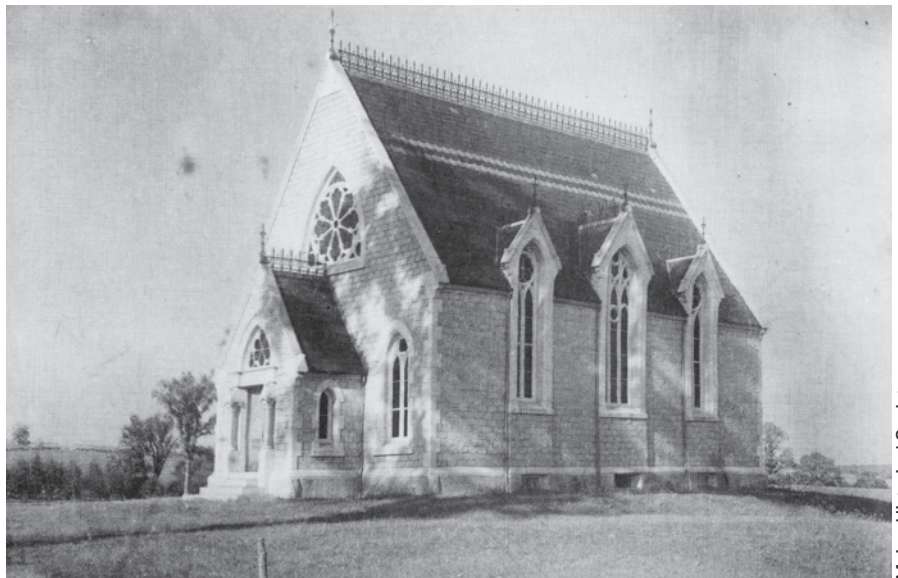
—Senator Wm. P. Frye¹

The state of Maine with its rough-hewn geography, sparse population, and rural nature has a library history matching its character. Once a wild frontier to early New England settlers, over the years the state would see the installation of many village libraries, which have to this day preserved much of their original simplicity and charm. Meanwhile, larger public, school, and academic libraries in Maine developed along with—and reflected—the country's rapid industrialization and wealth. Like their colleagues elsewhere, Maine's librarians have over time evinced a growing professionalism characterized by a deep sense of responsibility to their communities, while preserving an inherited collaborative spirit consistent with their Yankee forebears' spirit of economy and frugality.

The history of all libraries begins somewhere in humankind's creation of objects inscribed with shapes and characters that convey meaning. Historian Michael H. Harris describes early known written formats used in ancient times and suggests that materials become a "library" when they are organized for easy access to some group of people by individuals who work to organize and maintain them. He also notes that there were three kinds of early collections: temple, government, and business, conflating the

accumulation of knowledge with the development of complex civilizations (Harris 1999). Each category of library carries with it a founding ideology: religious collections are based upon the idea that words are worthy of reverence or fear; governments are concerned with politics and regulation; and businesses are motivated by profit. In the case of liberal democracies, education and the free flow of information is considered vital to an informed citizenry as a necessary basis for participatory, representative governance. All of these impulses can be seen at play in the development of 20th century Maine libraries.

The earliest collections in the New World were private, consisting mostly of religious texts brought over by the Puritans in the 17th century. The earliest public library effort is often attributed to a bequest from Captain Robert Keayne, who left his collection of religious texts to Boston with the proviso that they be properly housed and maintained in 1656. Any librarian who interacts with donors knows they must be handled delicately, and Captain Keayne was no exception. As historian Jesse H. Shera notes, the captain was contradictory and demanding, his will



Maine Historical Society

Norlands Library, Livermore, ca. 1890. Israel and Martha Benjamin Washburn settled on a Livermore farm that they named Norlands in 1809. There they operated a store before turning to farming. The family built a library, along with a meeting house at the farm.



Cary Library, Houlton, 1904. This Carnegie-funded library was designed by John Calvin Stevens of Portland.

“a curious conglomeration of religious piety, philanthropy, and spleen” (Shera 1949:16–17). Thanks to Keayne and subsequent donors the Boston Town House housed this early public library effort until it was destroyed by a fire in 1747 (Shera 1949).

SOCIAL LIBRARIES: MAINE’S EARLIEST PUBLICS

Maine’s earliest general libraries preceded its statehood by more than a century, and likewise date back to colonial times. These predecessors of today’s public libraries are generally termed “social libraries,” formed when a group of people decided to get together and contribute to a fund for buying books. Benjamin Franklin’s 1731 “Library Company of Philadelphia” is the best-known early social library. When his 1730 “Junto” book-sharing effort fell apart, he drew up proposals and sold shares to 50 subscribers for a social library (Shera 1949). Franklin’s ownership model was a proprietary social library, owned by its members, like stocks, in shares. Another model was the subscription, or association library, whose members paid fees, but did not own part of the library (Shera 1949).

Portland’s first proprietary social library was funded by some “prominent men who felt the lack of

reading material” (Portland 1949: 1). By 1766, the small group’s collection had grown to 93 volumes. However, the collection was scattered during the Revolution, after which efforts were made to rebuild it under the aegis of the Falmouth Library Association (Falmouth being the name of Portland at the time). This collection resided in the home of its librarian, Samuel Freeman, who held at different times a variety of offices including “schoolmaster, delegate to the Provincial Congress, Judge of the Probate Court, and Portland’s first postmaster” (Portland 1949: 2). Like all librarians, Freeman struggled with overdue items, advertising in December 24, 1785, for the return of such titles as *Leland’s View of Deistical Writers*, *Various Prospects of Mankind*, *Pemberton’s*

Sermons, and *London Magazines* from 1755 to 1763 (Portland 1949). In 1825, having accumulated a collection of 1,640 volumes and a membership of 82, the library’s owners began plans to house it in larger quarters, and the Portland Athenaeum was formed. Shares cost \$100; a year’s reading-room privileges could be purchased for five dollars, making this still a relative luxury. During this period, social libraries were also rising up elsewhere in Maine.

The rapid rise in the Portland Athenaeum’s collection paralleled the growth of book publishing and other industries during this period. In 1861, it boasted more than 10,000 volumes. Several other libraries had been established in the Portland area during this time, including the Maine Charitable Mechanics Association library of 1815, the Portland Society of Natural History library of 1854, the Young Men’s Mercantile Library Association and the Girls’ High School libraries of 1851, and the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) library of 1857. The Bangor Public Library’s web site dates its formation back to seven books in the footlocker of the Bangor Mechanic Association (www.bpl.lib.me.us/History.html). The importance of Maine’s social libraries was further acknowledged under an 1821 law, one of several such statutes passed in the

Northeast, beginning with New York State in 1796 and ending with Rhode Island in 1839 (Shera 1949: 62). These laws supported the formal organization of social libraries, with boards of trustees and bylaws.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN MAINE

During the second half of the 19th century, many public libraries were forming across the country. Library historian Michael H. Harris calls this period the “Rise of the American Public Library,” noting that the all-volunteer, early social libraries had a tendency to fail quickly. It was not until society had concluded that government needed to support basic services that a durable public library institution could evolve (Harris 1999). Most of Portland’s social libraries were burned during the “Great Fire” that consumed much of the city in 1866. The conflagration inspired talks in 1867 that in turn led to the establishment of the Portland Institute and Public Library, which would henceforth be supported by taxpayer dollars (Portland 1949). According to a handbook published in 1952, Bath’s Patten Free Library was founded in 1847. Jeff Cabral, director of Macarthur Public Library, dates Biddeford’s first free public library efforts back to 1863, asserting that it was among the first to provide services without charge. The dedicatory exercises of Washburn Memorial Library at “The Norlands” place that building’s construction at 1885.

Andrew Carnegie’s Contribution to Maine Libraries

This acceleration in the growth of public libraries was furthered by one of the Gilded Age’s best-known “robber barons.” Fueled by America’s feverish economic growth and a passion for libraries, self-made millionaire Andrew Carnegie provided 1,419 grants to libraries throughout the U.S., more than 18 of which were in Maine. From 1897 to 1911, Carnegie library grants were received by Auburn, Augusta, Caribou, Fort Fairfield, Freeport, Gardiner, Guilford, Houlton, Lewiston, Madison, Milo, Oakland, Old Town, Pittsfield, Presque Isle, Rockland, Rumford, Vinalhaven, Waterville, and the University of Maine (Jones 1997). Carnegie’s (1889) “Gospel of Wealth” ethic was well-suited to the commitment to lifelong

learning central to the public library mission:

the best means of benefiting the community is to place within its reach the ladders upon which the aspiring can rise—parks, and means of recreation, by which men are helped in body and mind; works of art, certain to give pleasure and improve the public taste, and public institutions of various kinds, which will improve the general condition of the people; —in this manner returning their surplus wealth to the mass of their fellows in the forms best calculated to do them lasting good.

Carnegie’s mixture of bootstrap ethic and social conscience made public libraries an obvious place for him to invest toward the end of his life.

State and Federal Aid

By 1916, Maine had 107 public libraries. An estimated 411 towns and cities were left without, although limited mail-order and a travelling library system were offered by the Maine State Library, which also coordinated an annual stipend program designed to encourage communities to install public libraries in their towns (MSL 1916). In the 1950s, postwar prosperity brought with it bookmobiles. On July 22, 1953, the *Lewiston Evening Journal* reported that a new bookmobile service was beginning and was anticipated to serve 5,000 school children plus adults. The federal Library Services Act (LSA) of 1956 and the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) of 1964 provided significant funding for public libraries and their counterparts on wheels, the bookmobiles. As Fry (1975) describes, these monies managed by state library agencies on behalf of communities resulted in the construction of many library buildings and the deployment of hundreds of bookmobiles throughout the country, primarily to rural areas. According to the April 16, 1981, *Bangor Daily News*, Maine’s bookmobile service was proposed to be eliminated and replaced by a books-by-mail service. The Maine State Library’s books-by-mail service still operates and now serves both rural communities and people who are homebound due to disability (www.maine.gov/msl/outreach/booksbymail).

PRIVATE LIBRARIES

Private libraries—one of the most basic and ancient forms—continued to be collected, treasured, and frequently left through wills to public, school, or academic libraries. Book donations would remain an important source for many American libraries, only tapering off in significance over time as libraries professionalized and acquired bigger budgets and books became ever more mass-produced. In 1900, Samuel Lane Boardman self-published a small book derived from columns in *The Bangor Daily Commercial* entitled *Descriptive Sketches of Six Private Libraries of Bangor, Maine*. Among them were described such gems as Colonel Porter’s collection of genealogy, family and local history; “Mr. Bliss’ Collection of Websteriana”; and the “Library of Frederick H. Appleton, Esq.,” which included background on Appleton’s family, noting that this “collection strong in history, political economy and philosophy, with the works of all the leading authors of antiquity and the modern writers in general literature” had been nurtured for generations (Boardman 1900: 117).²

COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

The first New England college had its venerable start in 1636; in 1638, this institution acquired its name thanks to a library donation from the Reverend John Harvard, who made the young venture a small gift of books and money (Harris 1999). Maine’s first institution of higher learning, Bowdoin College, opened its doors in 1802 with a library owing its existence to volumes contributed by several well-wishers, including Major General Henry Knox (Rush 1946). Although Bowdoin’s library had a small budget for its first 80 years, it had significant book donations from many individuals. In the early years, Bowdoin’s book stacks—like those of other academic libraries—were “closed,” meaning patrons had to request specific books from library staff who would retrieve them; also, undergraduates’ borrowing privileges were very limited, with freshmen unable to borrow at all since there was concern doing so might interfere with their studies. By 1877 this had changed, with students given free access to shelves and borrowing widespread (Rush 1946).

Collection and circulation statistics reveal massive growth during this period: by 1939, Bowdoin’s library held 181,219 volumes and had a circulation of 15,496, nearly double its circulation in 1890. As prosperity made books much more available and educational theories grew more expansive, so too did open access (Rush 1946).

Since librarianship had not yet developed as a profession during Bowdoin’s early years, its first librarians were also professors, among them Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who was librarian and instructor of modern languages from 1830 to 1835 (Rush 1949). Significantly, after 1910, many more Bowdoin College library books were selected and purchased by librarians than were acquired through donation, as had been the case earlier (Rush 1946).

Colby College, which had its beginnings as the “literary and theological institute” of Waterville College in 1818, was off to a slightly slower start: by 1909 it had a decent collection of “working books” with strength in history, biography, and classics (Rush 1946). Bates College was chartered in 1864 following a successful petition by a group of young seminarians. The son of its first college president, young Horace Cheney, spent much time and energy gathering together its first library, and in 1900 a major gift led to the construction of a new library building dedicated in 1902 (Rush 1946).

Of great significance to Maine’s higher education library scene was the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, which provided federal funding to help states to establish agricultural and technical colleges, provided at a time of accelerating national wealth and consequent need for skilled workers (Harris 1999). Like most early academics, the library of the land-grant college that would become the University of Maine relied upon relatively sparse donations and languished in its early days. However, according to Rush, it was the first Maine college to hire a professionally trained librarian, a graduate of Columbia University’s School of Library Economy, in 1888. From 1880 to 1939, the collection grew from 4,105 to 172,428 volumes, with an annual circulation of 27,996, having in the meantime received a Carnegie grant for a new library building in 1906. Like many other academic libraries, the present-day Fogler Library had its beginnings in a shared academic

space, but soon outgrew even its Carnegie building (Rush 1946).

DEPOSITORY LIBRARIES

As in every other state in the union, some of Maine's libraries are federal depositories. The Government Printing Office, or GPO, dates the depository library program and its mission of "Keeping America Informed" back to an act of Congress in 1813 (www.gpo.gov). Maine's regional depository is the University of Maine's Fogler Library; as a regional depository, it receives a copy of all GPO documents and also serves New Hampshire and Vermont. "Selective depositories," as the term implies, receive certain categories of publications in subject specialties. The number of depositories in Maine grew over time. Of the libraries established as depositories in Maine, Bates was first in 1883, while Colby, Bowdoin, and the Bangor and Portland public libraries soon followed in 1884. The University of Maine joined in 1907; the University of Maine School of Law in 1964; Maine Maritime Academy in 1969; Maine Law and Legislative Library in 1973; and the University of Maine at Presque Isle in 1979 (<http://catalog.gpo.gov/>). In 1981, the recently formed Maine Government Documents Discussion Group compiled a survey of Maine's depositories, revealing the specialties available at each one, from military documents at the Maine Maritime Academy to energy, geology, and recreation at the University of Maine at Presque Isle. Though increasing amounts of government data are becoming available online, the depository libraries remain a vital source of information nationwide.

SCHOOL LIBRARIES

The "school district library" efforts of the early- to mid-1800s tried to serve both children and communities, but due to lack of dedicated space, staff, and collection monies, these soon proved unsuccessful. Nonetheless, many Maine communities realized the value of good school libraries. The town of Castine was already home to an 1801 social library that became a



Bangor Public Library Librarians, 1914. The library was opened to the public in 1913, replacing one that had been destroyed by Bangor's "great fire" in 1911.

free public library in 1827 (Harris 1999). According to a turn-of-the-century report by the state superintendent of public schools in Maine, in 1873 the town of Castine also boasted a new school which was soon finished with furniture, library, apparatus, and improvements. This report also credited the Maine Educational Association with helping "to advance the cause of education by timely recommendations in favor of the abolition of the district system, of the establishment of free high schools, of free text-books, normal schools, libraries and the extension of the school year"—a sign of the increasing value placed on both education and libraries (Maine Office of State Commissioner 1901: 104). Similarly, the National Education Association's 1920 Standard Library Organization and Equipment for Secondary Schools of Different Sizes reveals continued advancement in school library professionalization, issuing clear guidelines for school library spaces, collections, and staffing.

MAINE LIBRARIES IN THE 20TH CENTURY: INCREASING PROFESSIONALIZATION AND STANDARDIZATION

The 20th century saw increasing professionalization and standardization among the nation's libraries. Melvil Dewey (famous for his Dewey Decimal System) founded the first practical library program

for library workers at Columbia University in 1887. A 1921 report by Charles C. Williamson funded by the Carnegie Corporation recommended, among other things, the distinction between professional librarians and clerical staff that remains with us today (Harris 1999). Since 1924, the American Library Association has been assessing and accrediting scholarly programs of library science for professional librarians. However, since the field of information science has been evolving so rapidly, there has been an ongoing need for workshops and other continuing education for library workers at all levels.

In Maine, one agency that has long provided support for improvement of libraries and librarianship is the Maine State Library (MSL), the subject of an article by Linda Lord elsewhere in this issue, which was initially established in 1836. In April 1911, the MSL announced in its first Bulletin of the Maine State Library the intent of sharing information about its work and that of the Maine Library Commission. The MSL also promoted library education, announcing in its July 1912 bulletin the upcoming “annual Maine Summer Library School” to be held in August at the state house; the October issue

included a lengthy report on the school, together with the names of all the students in attendance. The MSL’s duties included collecting lists of books purchased with the state aid that was at that time provided to libraries to support their collections, as well as acquiring and preserving complete sets of town and city reports of Maine communities through their public libraries.

Beneath these simple tasks lay a powerful and passionate service ethic, as voiced in a lecture by State Librarian H. E. Holmes at the 18th Annual Meeting of the Maine Library Association:

In the midst of dark predictions of the dangers which threaten the country, danger of class-hatred and class-strife, industrial slavery of the multitude of laborers to the few employers of labor, dangers in the world political which threaten the foundations of our government, dangers of State Socialism, Collectivism and anarchy, one point of light stands out preeminently, that is the fact that we have many prophets to warn us of the dangers that threaten us, the reefs of destruction that surround us.

Librarians had come to believe in their powerful mission: providing vital information to the citizenry:

But what of the Librarian? Does every librarian keep before him at all times a clear conception of his high and broad duties? Does he realize that he has been called to a life of service, service of his fellowmen, as surely as the teacher and the clergyman?

Furthermore, this mission obliged librarians to “try silently, quietly and inconspicuously to direct the taste of the readers toward the fields of good reading” (MSL 1912: 7–9).

Holmes’s speech reveals conflicting pressures on all Americans. Wars were brewing in Europe; inequities at home led to political and social discontent. Librarians saw their libraries as havens and communications centers vital to the well-being of the country. Through the selection of the right materials and acquisition of the right titles, they could help make their communities better,



Dyer Library Archives / Saco Museum

Old Dyer Library, Saco, shelf stacks, ca. 1900. Interior of the original library showing the main librarians’ desk in front of the book shelves. The library, built in 1893, was of the closed-stack style where only librarians had access to the shelves. Books would be requested of the librarian who would retrieve them for the patrons.

safer places. As such, they were in a sense a prototype for what Lizabeth Cohen terms “citizen consumers”—individuals who, by profession, purchased and arranged materials for the “good of the nation” (Cohen 2003: 23). Feelings of reverence, responsibility, and concern for making right purchases are part of the job.

After World War II in many parts of the country suburbs would grow exponentially and with them would come extensive public library systems, with multiple branch libraries. These were soon filled by an explosion of inexpensive print materials, followed by audiovisual materials and media. Maine, however, would continue to be almost entirely a one-library-per-town state, preserving much of its rural character.

Nevertheless, national prosperity meant progress for library services in Maine as well. A report on Maine libraries stated that there were 253 public libraries in the state; of the 73 libraries not responding to the survey, 65 served communities with populations of less than 2,500, indicating the relative inexperience and isolation of the smallest institutions (Arco, Inc. 1970). The exponential rise in library fortunes during this period of national prosperity is clear. According to the report, in 10 years the average library budget had risen from \$8,062 to \$16,527 (Arco, Inc. 1970). The number of libraries and their collections continued to grow in a variety of ways; for instance, in 1971, the Maine Law and Legislative Reference Library, which had previously been a collection of the Maine State Library, became a separate entity, providing substantial legal information to the legislature and citizens of the state (see Barden, this issue).

The 1980s may be seen as something of a crescendo in library growth and professionalization, with buildings filled and card catalogs rapidly giving way to online public access catalogs, or OPACS; materials were still in print or microformat, but access to them rapidly became computerized. During the 1990s through the present day, technology has rapidly been changing the face of libraries and library service, as libraries shift from a focus on print, reference, and preservation to digital knowledge discovery and instruction. As Sanborn and Nutty share in their article in this issue, Maine’s librarians, library workers, and library advocates of all kinds are committed to collaboration and resource sharing. For example, they have provided access


to library collections throughout the state through Maine InfoNet. Working with the Public Utilities Commission, as mentioned in Tom Welch’s article (this issue), libraries have linked people across the state through technology, providing access to millions of items and bringing the Internet to schools and communities through the Maine School and Library Network (MSLN) and the MARVEL databases.

Library education in Maine has had its own unique path and has in some instances been a trail-blazer. Into the 1990s, the Standing Advisory Committee on Continuing Education, SACCE, was an active and vital committee of the Maine Library Association. Working closely with the MSL, SACCE provided continuing education workshops for librarians. However, library workers in Maine were looking for ways to improve their educational options, and they found creative ways to do it. According to Tom Abbott, Dean of Libraries and Extended Campus Learning at the University of Maine at August (UMA), a non-accredited master’s in library science (MLS) program at the University of Maine shut down in the 1980s.

While the MLS was technically the minimum requirement for a position as a librarian, the reality in Maine was that a great many people in support staff positions working in various kinds of libraries needed some kind of preparation or certification. In response to this need, Abbott and his associates worked through the process of establishing an undergraduate library science curriculum at UMA. Because the program was founded on the distance-education model, it provided support for the emergence of a strong role for UMA as an online program service center for the University System. Following a natural evolution from a correspondence course via tapes and early email to ITV and Blackboard, the undergraduate programs in library science at UMA now serve more than 100 students enrolled from 25 states and internationally, graduating about 10 students per year. Walt Taranko of the Maine State Library was another key collaborator, working to establish an early online MLS for aspiring Maine librarians through the University of South Carolina, thus providing a pool of trained professional librarians native to the state (<http://librarygrist.net>).

SOME CLOSING THOUGHTS

In the end, thanks to everyone from Andrew Carnegie to professional librarians and local volunteers, the first image that comes to most Mainers' minds when they hear the word "library" is that of the beloved free public variety. And no matter what their size, communities love their village libraries. Jackie Bennett, director of the Bristol Area Library, writes (personal communication) that the Bristol area's first library was begun by three teachers in a vacant church building. After gathering together books for two years, the library was opened in 1962. When it met the same fiery fate as Portland's original library and was destroyed in the summer of 1981, it was rebuilt by October 1982, a testament to the pride and determination of people who love to learn and read.

The history of libraries in the state mirrors the development of the state and provides a sense of the concerns the citizens had for their access to information and ongoing education. Although there will be many changes in what libraries offer they will always have a place in Maine's communities, schools, and other institutions. 

ENDNOTE

1. Dedicatory Exercises of the Washburn Memorial Library 1885. Fergus Printing Company, Chicago.
2. Given the massive proliferation of publications and other reading materials available a hundred years later, it is hard to imagine a collection that could claim such depth and breadth as to include "the works of all the leading authors of antiquity and the modern writers in general literature." The closest thing to it would probably be the Library of Congress, whose web site proclaims that it contains "more than 34.5 million books and printed materials, as well as more than 117 million maps, manuscripts, photographs, films, audio and video recordings, prints and drawings, and other special collections" (www.loc.gov).

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