

The Public Library - An American Freedom

by Donald B. Reynolds, Jr.

Have you heard these questions? “Why should our community pay for a public library?” “We didn’t have a library when I was a kid – what do we need one for now?” “With all these computers and the Internet, we don’t need books anymore!”

Beginning with the early settlers arriving in America during the 1600’s, communities began establishing public libraries as a government service for the people. Benjamin Franklin founded the first lending library in Philadelphia in 1731. In 1809 Thomas Jefferson, (whose personal book collection was the foundation for today’s Library of Congress) wrote, “I have often thought that nothing would do more extensive good at small expense than the establishment of a small circulating library in every county, to consist of a few well-chosen books, to be lent to the people of the county, under such regulations as would secure their safe return in due time.”

The United States is the first country in the history of the world where citizens established and maintained a system of free public libraries, open to all, a basic freedom as a result of the First Amendment to the Constitution – to explore the world of ideas and information. Public libraries are an American value, born of the idea that a free people should have free access to all kinds of information. In practice that means that libraries give citizens access to a full spectrum of ideas that allows us to learn what we want, explore many points of view, and make informed decisions. This even includes some types of materials and ideas we might not necessarily agree with or choose for our children or ourselves.

In 1953, President Eisenhower wrote, “The libraries of America are and must ever remain the home of free, inquiring minds. To them, our citizens must be able to turn with clear confidence that there they can freely seek the whole truth.”

As we race headlong into a technological age that is sure to surprise us in ways we can’t even imagine, it is important to remember Eisenhower’s words. Public libraries will remain the solid foundation from which information will flow. But only if we, the citizens who use and benefit from libraries, support them as the keepers of our freedom to read, learn, and connect.

Today’s libraries are more vital than ever. Most of us could never afford to buy the books, magazines, videos, CDs, software, and computers the library offers our families. And contrary to popular belief, the vast majority of Americans do not have online connections at home. For those without Internet access at home, work, or school, research shows that libraries are the number one place for access.

So, what is a public library?

1. The library is more than a building: it is a staff ready to help customers of all ages search for knowledge, information, and entertainment. In addition, the staff will provide assistance in the use of the materials and equipment in the library.
2. The library has lots of resources to help parents teach their preschoolers to learn to read. By using the library early and often for both learning and pleasure, children will develop the critical thinking skills they need to succeed in school and throughout their lives.
3. The library has lots of resources to help elementary, secondary, and college students do their homework and school projects, especially at times when the school libraries are closed or don’t have what’s needed.
4. The library is a place for self-education and lifelong learning, exploration, and examination. Customers can investigate any topic of particular interest to them, for delight or to increase their personal skills, such as adults finding help to learn to read.

5. The library is, with its computers, an access point to the Internet and its wide range of resources. Someone has written that the Internet is the best library in the world, but all its books are strewn all over the floor. A real problem with the Internet is that information found there may be incomplete, out-of-date, factually wrong, biased, or just plain pranks. Since no one evaluates or edits the material on the Internet, anybody can publish anything. What the Internet needs is a good librarian, and one can be found at the local public library.
6. The library supports local economic development, finding information needed by local businesses and government officials, including entrepreneurs wanting to start new businesses.
7. The library offers an abundance of recreational reading, viewing, and listening materials just for fun and pleasure. It is interesting to note in this age of computers that more books are being published and sold today than at any time in our country's history.
8. The library is evidence of the quality of a community's life and what government officials think of their residents: it provides some of the tools needed to help us live. A community without a healthy, growing public library is not a healthy, growing place.

Although libraries don't look like they've changed, they are changing and dynamic places that exist and adjust to meet the needs and interests of their community residents.

The library is a window to the world, helping to enrich our minds, defend our right to know, safeguard our freedoms, and keep democracy healthy.

All you have to do to take advantage of these services (prepaid with our tax dollars) is to walk in the door. The library staff will be glad to show you and your family around, help you find what you need – whether it's a picture book, a class on how to use the

Internet, searching for your family roots, finishing a school assignment, finding a good recipe for tonight's dinner, looking for tips on how to write a resume, start a business, or whatever you need.

I look forward to the day when every county resident has a library card and uses it to exercise their freedom to read, learn, and connect to the whole world of ideas and information the library offers.

Said Barbara Bush, former First Lady of the United States, "Libraries really are one of the greatest gifts the American people have given themselves. They're a gift for all of us – no restrictions of age or gender or class or interest. But they're a gift that needs our constant care and attention – like everything else that's precious and valuable to us."

And your responsibility? Support this gift to ourselves and our community. And, when in doubt, go to the library.

Donald B. Reynolds, Jr. is Director of the Nolichucky Regional Library, which was organized in 1941 when the library boards of Grainger, Hamblen, Hawkins, and Jefferson counties were established at the urging of the TVA. Sevier County established its board and joined in 1942 (although there had been a library in Sevierville since 1920 - founded by Fred Rawlings, and in Gatlinburg since 1932 - founded by Anna Porter). Cocke County established its board in 1944 and Hancock County joined in 1987 (having been founded in 1978). Since its creation, the only purpose of the regional library has been to provide aid and support to the local governments and their library boards and staffs for the growth and development of local library services.

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