

Are Libraries a Thing of the Past, or a Staple of Reality?

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When Henry Ward Beecher said, “A library is not a luxury but one of the necessities of life,” he did not know all of what would come out of libraries in the future.¹ He did not know how libraries would evolve over time, but the statement remains true. Maintaining a place for people to go to obtain knowledge, community, and a sense of belonging is a vital aspect of libraries that makes them a necessary feature of life. Many factors come into play when it comes to understanding just how important a library can be for its community. There has been some concern lately that libraries are a thing of the past because reading for pleasure is on the decline, and new technologies are replacing the services libraries once provided. However, an examination of libraries' past and present, and a speculation about their future, suggests that libraries are here to stay. Libraries have faced challenges throughout history and are here to tell the story. While some of the most pressing challenges for libraries today include funding cuts, harassment of workers, and censorship, libraries are showing up to face these rising challenges, proving they are up for the fight. Some of the library's most important aspects include its role as a community hub, a space for women to find work and a sense of belonging, and a place for the free sharing of knowledge. As my research into libraries' past, present, and future potential suggests, the value of the American library is clear and shows no sign of disappearing, regardless of claims about the impending demise of the library as an institution.

¹ Henry Ward Beecher was an American Christian minister who openly supported the abolition of slavery and promoted love and forgiveness. He also had a significant role in the Women's Suffrage Movement and was brother to Harriet Beecher Stowe. “Henry Ward Beecher.” *Crusade for the Vote*, National Women's History Museum, www.crusadeforthevote.org/beecher. Accessed 19 Nov. 2025.

Part 1: The Past

Libraries have been at the core of American knowledge since the country's beginnings. They house the knowledge of all the books in their collection, as well as the people who work there. They are places where the community can come together while providing resources for people who need them. But the American library has come a long way from its beginnings in Franklin, Massachusetts, to the large-scale centers they are today. Libraries have always been a prevalent feature of the world, going back longer than America's beginnings. Still, they were adapted and transformed to fit the United States's growing needs and status as a country. Especially in the beginning, when the country was still learning how to function separately from the British Empire, libraries became an area for people to learn more and exchange ideas. The role of libraries has evolved over time and continues to do so, providing a necessary place for community engagement and the advancement of human knowledge.

Libraries' Beginnings

Before the USA became an independent country, it gained inspiration from several European countries, including France and Italy. One of the ideas that had gained popularity in these countries was literary salons, where people gathered to discuss art and literature.² This idea of sharing ideas with other community members gained popularity in America as well, gradually expanding to include membership libraries. These places enabled more people, especially from lower-income backgrounds, who did not have the ability to buy or own books, to access books and literature in one place. Benjamin Franklin started the first membership library in Philadelphia along with his philosophical group, the Junto. Membership libraries were accessed

² The rise of literary salons became more apparent during the Enlightenment and brought new ideas to social circles. This trend included women in learning spaces, empowering them and eventually leading to workforce opportunities (Brady n.p).

by paying participants who had access to all books in the collection, although non-members could also access the books for a book fee or collateral (Campbell n.p). In addition to membership libraries, which began making books more accessible, Franklin was also responsible for starting the first public library in the United States of America. In 1790, he donated a collection to the first public library in Franklin, Massachusetts, which would be available to any resident of the town. Public libraries were different from membership libraries and paved the way for increased open access because “Public libraries do not charge for services, are open to all, and operate with the intention of serving the needs of the public” (Campbell n.p). This idea would forge the way for public libraries to flourish over the next 200 years.

For libraries to remain free for their patrons, they must get funding from somewhere else. Grants, donations, and tax money were the primary means for the earliest libraries to raise funds, and this remains the case today. As smaller libraries became more popular, the first large public library opened in 1848 in Boston, Massachusetts. This location would house over 16,000 books, available to any resident of Massachusetts, making it the first large-scale, free, public library in the United States. As more of these libraries popped up throughout the growing country, 90 men and 13 women library professionals decided to come together in the hope of making an association for libraries.³ Melville Dewey and Justin Winsor were two of the driving forces for the first official meeting of the American Library Association (ALA n.p) on October 4th, 1876. Justin Winsor, a librarian at both the Boston Public Library and Harvard University, was elected the ALA’s first president on the first official meeting day.⁴ Melville Dewey remains one of the most famous names in the library industry. He was responsible for creating the first library

³ The library professionals at the first ALA meeting were composed of majority men and minority of women librarians from around the country and even some from England.

⁴ Justin Winsor was one of the leading members of the beginning libraries. A brief biography can be found at this citation: The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Justin Winsor.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 20 July 1998, www.britannica.com/biography/Justin-Winsor.

school, which taught people how to be successful librarians. He also created the Dewey Decimal system, which organized books by subject rather than simply by author's last name (Kimmel n.p).⁵ The creation of the ALA was one of his other major achievements, and it was instrumental for libraries because it created a system of norms for library functions that have been used throughout time.

A Woman's Role

The growth of the library system in America is inextricably intertwined with the rise of women in the white-collar work force. Since the first ALA meeting in 1876 had 13 women, they were an important part of the library system from the beginning, but over time, their involvement has increased drastically. Initially, most women started as volunteers in libraries, but soon they began to get paid roles. Even then, men were primarily the ones in any managerial or leadership roles for several years to come. Men made up the majority of the workforce, with 52% of workers being men in the 1880s. But by 1930, only 8% of library workers were male (Beveridge n.p). Women began to find a livable profession in libraries, and their presence only increased over time. Since then, female library workers have risen to 80% in 2021, a stark difference from their humble beginnings in the 1880s. Although the distribution of genders in management positions happened slowly, it continues to grow even today.

One of the primary reasons why so many women turned to library work was the newly established working standards. These standards were put in place primarily through the use of library schools. Melville Dewey started the first school for learning Library Sciences in 1887. This school would teach services such as: “Cataloging, collection development, reference, and

⁵ Kimmel explains the significance of the earliest stages of the ALA and Melville Dewey's role. She mentions the historical significance for the time and the unprecedented change this had on the library industry.

children's librarianship, as well as a growing number of new fields" (Brady et al., n.p). This collection of services provided the basis for all library operations, and by teaching them, the educational standards for librarians were raised. These schools were governed by male faculty members, although women taught the classes and ran the operations of the schools. This profession became appealing to many women who "could either not afford or did not want to go to college," and also because of the "relatively short" training time and an opportunity for adventure as libraries began to expand West (Brady et al., n.p). It became a convenient option for women who wanted to work and utilize the intellectual resources they had available to them. This also occurred during a time when working women were on the rise, but the prejudice of what kinds of work was appropriate for them was often put into question. In her sourcebook on the first 100 years of women in librarianship, Kathleen Weibel states that: "Working in libraries was socially acceptable for women because the field was seen as a fitting extension of women's traditional behavior pattern" (Weibel xiv). Although this idea of what type of work should be "acceptable" for women is outdated now, libraries provided a space for women to work outside of the house but still remain within the realm of public approval, until they would eventually push for more opportunities.

As more opportunities arose, women found themselves searching for higher-level positions within libraries, which were roles typically taken by men. One way that women were able to do this was by traveling to new libraries in rural towns. Most large-scale libraries were in the North, where cities were more heavily populated. But many women wanted to bring more steady library services to rural Southern areas. These women could assume leadership roles when they traveled, so they were able to have more power over the running of their library. What many of these women found in these rural libraries was that their primary function was not just lending

books to the community, but it was used “more as meeting places than educational resources” (Brady et al., n.p). A primary reason for this was the lack of funding for relevant books.⁶ The women who came here adjusted to understand that libraries became a place of community rather than simply for educational or literary services. So, they helped turn them into community hubs and provided access to materials for a wider audience through traveling libraries and other services such as bookmobiles and wartime book delivery.⁷ The idea that libraries are a center of the community and provide for the community itself has been a long-standing quality of libraries ever since, and women were at the forefront of bringing it into existence.

Carnegie and Community

Ever since Benjamin Franklin started the first public library in 1790, there has been a rapid expansion of libraries all over the country. Less than 150 years later, by 1920, there would be more than 3,500 libraries in the United States (Barry et al n.p). Many people helped achieve this feat, but Andrew Carnegie funded over half of these libraries and allowed them to flourish and expand. Carnegie was a successful steel magnate who worked in the railroad company, but decided to give away all his money to support the creation of libraries all across the country, for the rest of his life.⁸ With the help of female librarians across the country who reached out for support and provided the foundation of their library, Carnegie spent \$41 million over the course of his life to fund the 1,679 Carnegie libraries across the country (Bossaller 23). Carnegie also notably supported the first library, and several thereafter, that served African American patrons during the segregation laws.

⁶ Books that were seen as “outdated or unappealing materials” often lined the shelves of rural libraries and lacked the funding for newer, relevant materials (Brady n.p).

⁷ During WWI and WWII, the ALA partnered with the Red Cross to gather donations so they could deliver thousands of books to US soldiers stationed overseas.

⁸ “In his autobiography, Carnegie remembered that, as a child, ‘I resolved, if wealth ever came to me, that it should be used to establish free libraries’” (Brady et al n.p).

Andrew Carnegie set the stage for libraries to thrive throughout many communities, but for a library to be successful, it must have its primary resource: books. The acquisition and control over the books in a library's collection is part of the cataloging role for librarians. This role provides the heart of a library because they decide what books are available for their patrons to use. Up until the 1950s, libraries used their power to select only books that were “morally acceptable” and to “commend what is wrong” (Bossaller 30). However, in the early 1930s, professionals within and outside of the ALA began to fight this idea of censorship. The director of the public library in Washington, DC, George F. Bowerman, fought for “free opinion” in libraries as well as others fighting for “the freedom to read” (Bossaleler 31). This began to change the ideas of many people within the industry and led to the ALA creating the Committee on Intellectual Freedom that worked to “safeguard the rights of library users” (Bossaller 31) in 1940. Librarians continued the fight against censorship and created libraries to be a place for all books, so that anyone could learn and enjoy any book in any library.

In addition to books, libraries in the 1950s began to expand their services to include more than just book resources or leisure reading. They expanded to include programming that served the community for more than just academic pursuits. Programming could include storytime, discussion groups, community events, fundraising events, or many other types of programs that encourage community involvement. This would turn out to be one of the primary functions of libraries from then on. Since libraries are “some of the only truly free public spaces where local residents can meet outside of home and work” (Brady et al), they became a meeting place for people to use however they need. Librarians wanted to provide resources and programs that could serve the greater community, which increased the usability of libraries.⁹ Some of the

⁹ Libraries were very useful for research and academic pursuits but their useability increased when they incorporated outside services to get people in the doors more often and for more reasons than just research.

programming that they began to implement were summer reading events for children, which can be a child's way of becoming more immersed with literature. They also included discussion groups for adults to share opinions and have more conversations outside of their regular routine.¹⁰ Additionally, libraries became a place for clubs to hold meetings, becoming a true community hub. Programming efforts have been especially helpful for communities when disaster strikes. Certain libraries, like the Houston Library, have come together to gather support and resources for patrons after hurricanes. By increasing the scope of what a library has to offer, they have become true centers of a community, proving their worth to the world.

Immigrants and Segregation

Libraries have always had the goal to provide services to as many people as possible, and while the level of this has changed over time, it provides a foundation for the library as an American institution. One of the groups of people that libraries began to provide special care for was immigrants, and this continues today. In the 1880s-1920s, immigrants came to America from a multitude of different countries, including Puerto Rico, Mexico, Japan, and many European countries. When they got here, many libraries found that they could help this special population in their adjustment to living in America. Several of the additional resources and services they began to implement were specific guidebooks to help immigrants learn about the United States, a wider selection of books in different languages so that people of other countries could still engage with literature, and "Americanizing" efforts. Americanizing began as a way to help immigrants learn the information they needed to pass the citizenship tests that were required of them. Also, this effort was used to help assimilate people into the culture of America through

¹⁰ This notion of adult discussion groups mirrors the French and Italian literary salons popular in the early 1700s. This signals a desire throughout different eras for finding community and discussing shared topics.

“English language and civics instruction” (Hammond-Todd), which became helpful for both the immigrants learning the culture of their new home as well as the librarians who gained a “greater appreciation of, and respect for, cultural differences” (Novonty 345).¹¹ So, the efforts to help the new Americans were effective in providing everyone involved with more knowledge. While the immigrants learned about the new world they would be living in, the librarians were able to learn more about the world through the people they were helping.

Another demographic that was greatly impacted by the expansion of libraries was African Americans. However, their history was marked with more challenges and pushback. America has had a long, troubled history regarding African Americans, and the library system was also a part of that. In accordance with segregation laws and the “separate but equal” doctrine, libraries remained segregated until the Civil Rights Act of 1964. At first, libraries were only available to the white population, but Andrew Carnegie and his corporation were responsible for helping fund and create separate libraries open to African Americans, with the first one opening in 1905 in Louisville, Kentucky. Libraries like this, called “Negro Branches,” continued to open, albeit slowly, due to lack of funding and staff, and by 1946, just under one third of all 597 libraries across the US South had some kind of service available to African Americans (Barry et al n.p). These services were important for people to be able to come together, get the necessary education materials, and provide important community spaces, although, of course, they still had room for improvement.

When the Civil Rights Movement began in the United States, libraries would be at the forefront of some major changes, with a call for more access to services for people of all races. The growing desire for African American libraries to become more prevalent in everyday society

¹¹ Hammond-Todd references Novonty’s quote in her article. Librarians gathered new insight and appreciation for immigrants through the process of Americanizing them. While providing a multitude of other resources to help them.

began to rise. Some of the major moments in the quest for library equality came from different members of the population. On March 27, 1961, a group of nine members from the NAACP Youth Council, called the Tougaloo Nine, attempted to use a white-only library in Jackson, Mississippi, but were arrested after they refused to leave (Barry et al n.p). Also, the white director of Selma Carnegie Library, Patricia Blalock, would be one of the first library directors to hire an African American at a library and promoted integration of whites and blacks within her library (Graham 17). Eventually, with the Civil Rights Act and consistent support of the American Library Association's goals of serving any and all people of a community, libraries became fully integrated and accessible to people of all races.

Digitization of Libraries

In their early years, libraries had to focus on staying relevant and up to date with the rising needs of the community; they have continued to maintain this goal throughout their history. In addition to the above-mentioned desire for support of everyone and community engagement, another value that has remained important is collaboration. Collaboration between people and between libraries has been especially prevalent since interlibrary loan became a common practice in 1886. This allowed libraries to borrow books from other libraries for their patrons when the book was not in their catalog.¹² This allowed for the idea of free sharing of knowledge to become commonplace for libraries everywhere. This idea took a new shape in 1994 when Vice President Al Gore expressed interest in a universal digital library. Librarians caught onto this idea so that they could follow their primary values and “make their collections available to everyone, everywhere” (Marcum 38). Eventually, in 2004, Google would announce

¹² Libraries in an area, often in close cities or counties, would join together to create a “consortium” making it even easier to loan books between libraries. For libraries that were farther away from each other or had a limited catalog, they would use the service “Prospector” to loan books out.

that it would create a fully digital library. They partnered with several university libraries to participate in a “mass digitization” to scan and upload all books to their platform so anyone could obtain access to them.

This effort would turn into a massive undertaking that would ultimately never be completely finished. After Google and several libraries began this project, certain concerns began to arise. While many librarians were excited and saw this digitization as the “next phase of librarianship,” there were also many who saw it “as a direct threat to the profession” (Marcum 106). People began to worry about what the need for librarians and physical locations would be if the digital library were so vast. In addition to this, another primary concern that developed was that Google’s focus on digitization and sales often ignored copyright legality and led to a failed court settlement and the loss of universities’ assistance in digitizing all texts.¹³ These concerns did not completely stop the digitization efforts throughout the library and academic research community, but provided more room for discourse. Eventually, the creation of HathiTrust would improve the digital resource world. HathiTrust is a large-scale not-for-profit collaboration of digital library materials that are completely protected under copyright law (“Welcome to HathiTrust” n.p). As an offshoot of Google’s original goal, HathiTrust, as well as a multitude of other online research material websites, such as JSTOR and EBSCO, have allowed for greater access to different types of resources all over the world.

Part 2: The Present

Today, libraries remain a significant asset for their community. They have always been dedicated to serving their community and providing people with more access to the resources

¹³ The court settlement against Google for not complying with all copyright laws in their efforts to digitize led all universities previously helping on the project to pull out. Leading to the project never being fully completed.

they need. However, like many things, libraries are ever-changing and have to adapt to the current needs of the community and the resources of the world. The last 10 years have been a new age for libraries with the rise of technology and AI, as well as a consistent need for community hubs. Libraries today continue to be a source of support for their community, although they have faced rising challenges. These challenges, like funding cuts, harassment of librarian workers, and changing technology needs of its patrons, have not made libraries obsolete. Instead, this important institution has risen to the challenge, learning how to support new and emerging needs of the community that only a library can give.¹⁴

Groups Who Use the Library

Libraries are there for all of the people who use them and need them. Certain groups tend to use them more often than others.¹⁵ These groups are what keep libraries thriving and in constant need due to the extra resources that they provide. One of these primary groups is parents and families of young children. In a study completed by the Pew Research Center in 2015, they tested which members of the community were using the library, how they thought libraries impacted the community, what people do at libraries, and several other functions. In one of these groups, people were asked if they thought that a library closure would have a significant impact on the community and on their own families. In these results, “70% of parents of minors assert that a library closure would have a major impact” on the larger community, and “39% of parents of minor children say” it would have a major impact on their family (Horrigan). Therefore, a

¹⁴ Jennifer Howards article “The Complicated Role of the Modern Public Library” helps to explain many different aspects of the challenges and responsibilities of public libraries that helped inspire many of these thoughts. Howard, Jennifer. “The Complicated Role of the Modern Public Library.” *National Endowment for the Humanities*, www.neh.gov/article/complicated-role-modern-public-library. Accessed 7 Oct 2025.

¹⁵ This link provides trends of library use in the USA throughout all states 1995-2018. It compares their program attendance and circulation use: “Use of Public Libraries.” *American Academy of Arts & Sciences*, 24 Sept 2016, www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/public-life/use-public-libraries.

significant part of the population with minor children has found libraries to be an unequivocal asset to the community.

For many children, the local public library can be a place to visit outside of the regular day-to-day routine. For their caregivers, it can offer a different environment and provide assistance for their growing child's needs. In terms of physical resources that they offer, children's libraries offer early development books for parents and beginning reader picture books for children to support their early literacy education. In addition to this, most offer a multitude of programming opportunities that keep children engaged and enhance their reading skills, including but not limited to early literacy storytime, baby and toddler storytime, summer reading programs, and child expert-guided play. One example of expert-guided play is put on by a company called Family Place Libraries. This group is funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), where local libraries partner with Family Place Libraries to set up an area in their library where babies and toddlers partake in educational play. Then, early childhood experts come in and observe them play. The parents are then allowed to ask these experts, such as nutritionists and speech therapists, about their child if they are worried. So, places like this offer extra resources and help for parents, while providing an engaging and educational playtime environment for children. According to Susan Dunn, the Youth Collection Development Librarian at Broomfield Library, their Family Place Library has become a place where parents can seek extra support for their child, right there, in the community (Dunn).

In addition to children and their caregivers, other populations such as lower-income patrons and multilingual/Hispanic community members find the library resources invaluable. The free access to almost anything in the library is one of the most notable features of public libraries. This can be very appealing to patrons who have a lower income or are unhoused. So,

finding vital resources can be tricky, but libraries create an environment where people can go for free with no risk of being kicked out or feeling out of place. For people without a home or who do not have safe access to a roof, bathrooms, wifi, etc., libraries can fill in the gaps and provide the necessary help that people may need to stay safe and healthy. In fact, a study done by the Department of Family Medicine in Portland, Maine, began to look at how library use might affect the physical health of all its patrons. They concluded that “Lack of recent library usage was associated with current smoking, drug use, and depression–anxiety” as well as the fact that “moderate/high [library] card use and card use within the previous six months were both associated with over two times the odds of quitting smoking” (Zager 195). This correlation is the product of a study at one library across the country. However, it provides important information as to how the consistent use of libraries can be beneficial for more than just people's education, but their health as well.

The multilingual and Hispanic communities are another primary group of people who use the library and its services to great effect. Since the beginning days of libraries helping incoming immigrants with their citizenship tests and adult education, libraries have been centered on helping all those who walk through their doors. Today, libraries obtain new books in languages other than English every day. There are specific bilingual storytime programs where the books are read in Spanish so that they can be enjoyed by children and parents who do not want to or are not able to listen to an English book. In addition to this, there are separate shelves or cases where other language books are held for people to choose from. In her interview, Susan Dunn mentioned that this does provide a challenge because when a native English speaker is buying books in other languages, it can be challenging to decide what to purchase. After all, they might not speak the language themselves. However, larger libraries like the Denver Public Library

often have several different collection leaders who speak languages like Russian, Japanese, Hindi, etc., who can make informed decisions on buying new books. Libraries are often aware of their growing need to provide more resources for all people of the community, and including a broader range of language opportunities in the form of books as well as programming helps to make it feel like a community hub.¹⁶

Another aspect of libraries that helps to meet different people's needs is technology. Libraries have had to become fully equipped to provide free wifi and internet access to their patrons. Many people do not have free access to the internet, whether they are homeless, traveling, or are not able to afford internet. The internet has become a vital tool for people, and it is necessary for people who want to find jobs, who need to communicate with health professionals, who need to further their education, etc.. Libraries help people bridge this digital gap, and many help educate the public on how to use the internet effectively as well. This concept describes digital equity, which helps to describe the disparity between people of different socio-economic circumstances and their access to digital technology. Neil D. Grimes and William Porter explain this in their article "Closing the Digital Divide Through Digital Equity: The Role of Libraries and Librarians," when they explain that, "Digital equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services" (Grimes 313). This statement further explains why digital literacy and support are so important. In order for people to thrive in the world and have access to the same opportunities as others, they must also have access to the same digital resources as others.

¹⁶ The ALA's published "Library Bill of Rights" explains the doctrine of all libraries and the values they choose to uphold. Among these are the focus on the community and the focus on acceptance for all patrons of the library. "Library Bill of Rights." *American Library Association*, 30 June 2006, www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill.

Censorship and Harassment

A primary doctrine used by libraries is the notion of “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” which was originally coined by Rudine Sims Bishop and is used throughout libraries today.¹⁷ This doctrine is described with the idea that “children, but especially those who are marginalized, need books to be mirrors so they can see themselves, windows so they can look in and see other worlds, and sliding glass doors, allowing readers to enter different worlds” (Tyson 1). So many libraries have made it a priority to include books that show different people, and by putting them all together, they can become more widely accepted. According to Susan Dunn, at Broomfield library, 17 years ago, the head purchaser of children's books did not buy books with Black children on the cover because “they don’t check out in Broomfield, but that is no longer the case” (Dunn). So even though these books were not checked out before, they are now consistently checked out and highly prized for their ability to be a mirror, a window, and a sliding glass door to more children in the community.

While this doctrine has been a significant aspect of libraries around the country, it has not stopped outside community members from attempting to censor and take away access to certain books from library catalogs. Since 2020, a record number of unique titles have been challenged throughout libraries: “2,452 unique titles were challenged, the third highest number ever documented by ALA and significantly exceeding the annual average of 273 unique titles over the period from 2001–2020” (Censorship 1). This statistic is around 9 times as many challenged books in just 5 years compared to the previous 20. The books are being challenged by several different groups, with the top types being different pressure groups, board/administrations in schools, and elected officials/government entities. The majority of books being challenged are

¹⁷ Colorado librarians Susan Dunn and Jace Long both mentioned this doctrine in their interviews, signaling that librarians across different libraries are aware of and fully utilizing this concept.

due to their content containing any of the following: “illegal obscenity for minors; inclusion of LGBTQIA+ characters or themes; and [books] dealing with topics of race, racism, inclusivity, equity, and social justice” (Censorship 1). These books can provide a mirror, a window, and a sliding glass door for many people and teach them other ways of life, but they are being challenged by groups of people wanting to prohibit their access in libraries. By prohibiting this access, these pressure groups are paving the way for a lack of access to materials and resources for groups who are already underrepresented in libraries and the rest of the country.

In addition to the increased challenge of books in libraries and, therefore, a lack of access to a complete education on other people's experiences, librarians are also being threatened and harassed for supporting full access to books. In particular, one librarian has made her story public for the world to hear. Amanda Jones is a librarian in Watson, Louisiana, who spoke out at a library board meeting for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ books, where there were talks of removing and censoring these books from shelves. She spoke up to advocate for these books but woke up the next day to death threats and online images, which she described as “a picture of me with a target around my head” (Jones). Jones became an activist and author, describing her story and continuing to advocate against book bans in schools and libraries. Jones’s story is only one of many women’s stories who have dealt with growing unrest surrounding book bans, but her story shows the fight that people are willing to put up with to keep these books on shelves and free for all to consume.

Funding

In order for libraries to be free for the public to use, they have to receive money to raise the funds to provide access for everyone. Different libraries obtain funding from different places,

but “Over 80% of funding for U.S. public library operations comes from local tax receipts... Together, state and federal funds accounted for approximately 10% of total annual operating budgets of U.S. public libraries” (De Rosa). So, most of the funding for many public libraries comes from the community itself and the various property and city taxes they pay. According to both librarians, Susan Dunn and Youth Librarian Jace Long at Old Town Library in Fort Collins, CO, both of their respective libraries are primarily tax-funded with additional help from grants and donations.¹⁸ Due to the tax support, city libraries and their funding are subject to how much the city residents spend their money. In Fort Collins, Colorado, there is a high cost of living, so property taxes are often high. While the residents of Fort Collins homes may not enjoy this, the three different library branches located there can enjoy the benefits.

Conversely, for some libraries across the country, and for many state libraries, funding comes from the federal government. These libraries receive money through the IMLS, a federal agency responsible for distributing funds to museums, libraries, and archive programs (Solomon).¹⁹ However, in March of 2025, President Donald Trump issued an executive order that cut down several financial institutions, including the IMLS, and in turn reduced the amount of federal funding to these libraries and institutions. Many public libraries that are tax-funded, have not been directly affected by these funding cuts, but for the “9,000 public libraries and their more than 16,500 local branches [that] rely on federal funding” (Dorgelo 4), these cuts will be detrimental; not to mention that many of the libraries that rely on federal funding do so because of their location in typically lower-income areas of the United States. So, people who already have less access to extra resources that the library provides have been reduced even further. The

¹⁸ For a full comprehensive budget and funds allocation of the Poudre Library District, see *2025 Comprehensive Annual Budget*. Poudre Libraries, 2025.

¹⁹ Marissa Solomon from 9 News reports on the direct threats that federal funding has for Colorado libraries and museums.

cuts would directly affect grant amounts and have already led to significant staffing cuts and “shuttered programs” (Dorgelo 5).

Libraries remain at the epicenter of their communities and have become more than just a place for books and research. Their status as a community hub has become more important than ever, with many groups of people being unable to meet in other areas of the city. Maintaining a strong library presence across town lines is vital to the community's success and allows people to thrive. In order for them to help people, they need the money to do it. While federal funds do not directly pay for most of the public libraries across the country, the defunding of the IMLS sends a message about what kind of services and resources are important for the government to help support. Even tax-supported libraries that receive no federal funding have had to make changes because of these efforts. This is because community groups that may have received money through federal funds now have nowhere to meet and have to utilize more of the library's resources. Alternatively, many tax-funded libraries are a direct subsidiary of their city, which is federally funded, and may go on a hiring freeze, like Broomfield, Colorado, will be doing in 2026. Therefore, no new librarians or subsequent employees will be able to help and assist in their functioning. By defunding libraries and arts, the current government is taking away resources from its underrepresented communities and signaling that the resources and sense of belonging brought upon by libraries are not worth its time or money.

Part 3: The Future

By going back to the beginning of libraries' presence in America and following their journey across time, there can be many conclusions gathered and many predictions for what is to come. Libraries have been no strangers to controversy and challenges, but they have continued to

prevail. They have had to adapt and adjust to the rising needs of the community and the people who use its services the most. This perseverance and presence in the community will continue to remain strong in the future. Future libraries will look different from the first one, meaning they will continue to evolve. Some aspects may change, such as the presence of physical books. The rise of digital materials and various resources could become more popular than physical books, but physical books are not going away. The level of community engagement is on the rise, and libraries are becoming centers of the community and meeting places more than ever before. The role of women in libraries continues to evolve, and their place in libraries' future is vital. Finally, the role of technology and artificial intelligence poses a new, unprecedented challenge for libraries, which will likely lead to a push for change.

Function of Physical Resources

When libraries were first established in America, the primary function was the presence of physical resources, such as books. People would come looking for books to read and use them for research. Over time, this has changed; physical books are not as in demand as they once were, and technology use has risen. Considering the world is in the technology age and most people's communication is online, libraries have matched this change. They have helped to make books more accessible digitally for people, and they have worked to provide easy access to digital technologies. However, regardless of the increase of digital resources and materials, physical books and resources remain a strong presence throughout libraries and are still popular among all different age groups. Circulation clerks consistently check out books, check them in, and decide which ones to keep. Physical books will remain a primary function of libraries in the years to come, but the focus on digital materials will take precedence. According to the Library

Journal's review on 2024 library spending, "Urban and suburban libraries devoted the greatest part of their budgets—more than 30 percent—to digital materials" (Peet n.p). Therefore, digital resources have become the new focus for many librarians. However, the price of a digital copy can be up to 4x the price of a physical copy of the same book.²⁰ Therefore, this can also explain the need to allocate more funds to digital inclusion. Ultimately, the type of materials that the public chooses to check out will set the stage for what resources libraries will prioritize in the years to come.

When considering the function of physical books in libraries, a key place to start is with the youngest readers, children. Children, especially those under 12, are highly impressionable and are growing up in a rapidly changing world. With digital books and resources on the rise, many parents have become increasingly aware of the negative effects of screens when it comes to learning. For several years, the term "iPad kid" has risen in popularity, especially for generation alpha kids who are learning to grow up with near constant access to technology.²¹ There are many debates on what is healthy screen time, but when it comes to books, technology can play a useful role, although it has its drawbacks. While digital books are helpful for zooming in or clicking on words that the child might not know, it does not offer the tangible aspect of holding a book in their hand and connecting with the book and the people around them. Physical books, especially for younger children, offer a nurturing aspect when combined with a caregiver. As Scholastic has explained, "Cuddling with a parent over a book or gathering around the teacher for storytime helps kids associate reading with nurturing" (Deam n.p), and can therefore set the stage for the child's future reading experiences. Creating a strong, positive association

²⁰ This dramatic price increase is due to copyright rules and licensing. A physical copy of a book must only be bought once, whereas a digital copy must have the rights acquired for distribution in addition to the copy of the material itself.

²¹ The term "iPad kid" is often used to describe a child who has consistent access to technology and can often be found in public with an tablet or phone that they are using to keep their attention. This can be used to condemn children and their technology use.

with reading and the tactical experience along with it is vital for children early on. Libraries cater to hundreds of children a day, and the books they walk around and pick up from the shelves are instrumental for their learning development throughout time.

In addition to the presence of books as physical resources, numerous other physical resources have been gaining popularity in libraries across the country. Now, instead of just books and information-related materials, practical and enjoyment-based materials are on the rise. According to Janine Penny, the Human Resources Business Partner at Poudre Library District, several of the most used services in the library include resources such as “GoPro cameras, bird watching kits, and gadgets” (Penny). These are just a few examples of the physical resources available in libraries for checkout. More examples include cooking supplies (pots, pans, and utensils), Wifi hotspots, craft kits, blood pressure monitors, and more.²² These resources have little to no relation to books, but they are physical items that patrons must check out with a library card and go into the library to pick up. By including these types of resources in libraries, they are diversifying the kind of help that they can provide for the community. Libraries are ensuring that they stay up to date with the evolving needs of their patrons and keep them engaged. Maybe a patron walking into the library does not need a book that day, but they need help with acquiring kitchen materials. The library can provide that, while also increasing awareness of the various other resources, like books, that the patron might not be aware of. Through expanding their repertoire of resources, libraries solidify their position as a provider of assistance and support for the community.

Community Focus

²² For a more extensive list of the types of “gadgets and things” that Poudre Library offers, see their website at poudrelibraries.org/things/.

Ever since libraries started expanding their efforts toward supporting community members through their various needs, libraries have flourished. They have remained a place where people can go, regardless of age, economic status, or other factors, and find support and community. This is not going away. It will only increase. A primary feature of libraries that will continue to be one of their greatest assets is the physical building and location of the library itself. In order for people to come together, they need a place to do it. Libraries have evolved from the single desks in between stacks of books, sheltered from one another to include study rooms and large areas for people to interact. These spaces will become ever more important and provide a place for people to go, outside of their daily routine, to meet with others and connect. With a growing political climate and technology-focused world, having a place for people to travel to, outside of their phones and into a place of open neutrality, is instrumental for people to make connections. Regardless of the funding cuts and desire to retreat into the online world, people are still showing up at libraries, and they will continue to do so as long as the libraries have the community in mind. This has been their goal from the beginning, and librarians everywhere continue to promote that vision.²³

The United States is a place of democracy and freedom of speech. People in the same place can have two completely different ideas for how they want the world to look. The idea of free expression was instituted from the beginning, and it continues today. However, the rise of strong, diverse thought has created a divide in the country. People with opposing views often do not know the full story of why one person may feel one way or the other. Therefore, places where expression can be explored are vital. Libraries are open to everyone, regardless of opinion, and are a place for people to share with each other. The ALA directly mentions this on their

²³ The earliest doctrines of the American library system, including the “Library Bill of Rights” has commented on open access to materials and community focus of its members. Therefore, showing the long-standing dedication to a community centered library experience.

website about the interpretations of the library bill of rights when they say that “Libraries should support civic engagement by encouraging political discussion in designated forums. They should not avoid these discussions out of fear of offense or controversy” (“Politics in American Libraries” n.p). By including this statement in the information that helps rule all libraries, the ALA defines what it means for a library to support its community. Each community may interpret this statement and may govern themselves the way they see best, but in general, the openness to political discourse is a value and function of libraries. In a world where people have become so divided and opposed to each other, a place of true community can help bridge the gap. A community meeting supporting one topic may be in one conference room, and a meeting supporting another opposing topic may be in another, and both are welcome, both are valued. Having a space like this, in this country, is necessary because it allows no voice to be alienated and all voices to be heard.

A primary feature of community spaces in libraries that are turning into immensely useful services is the introduction of makerspaces. A library makerspace is a collaborative space where people can come together to make new things.²⁴ These places include different materials for DIY and often have services that many people might not have at home, like a 3D printer or Cricut machine. These places have become immensely popular, and people will come to make personalized gifts for friends and family, or even utilize the makerspace resources for a small business to get them off the ground. Places like this increase the community aspect, because generally these are large rooms where people can interact with each other and create something new. Makerspaces will become a primary feature of libraries in the future, with many libraries already expanding or creating new makerspaces. This addition will allow for a deeper association

²⁴ For a full Librarians Guide to Makerspaces with additional information and benefits, see the Open Education Database’s article. “A Librarian’s Guide to Makerspaces: 16 Resources.” *Open Education Database*, 6 July 2017, www.oedb.org/ilibrarian/a-librarians-guide-to-makerspaces/.

with help and resources, allow an outlet for people to be creative and work with their hands, and allow a collaborative space for people to come together with one another.

A Woman's Future Role

Women have always retained a strong presence in the library system. They fought for their right to have a presence in libraries, and over time, they took many of the top leadership spots. With the majority of library workers being female-identifying today, the future of librarianship seems to continue this trend, although a rise of other gender identities could grow. A report completed by the American Library Association in 2021 reported that the gender distribution for part time employees was 81.7% female, 16.6% male, 1.7% of a different gender identity, this is similar to the part time demographics with 75.9% female, 23.2% male, .9% of a different gender identity (“Public Library Staffing Report” n.p). While this shows that the overwhelming majority of librarians are female identifying, the percentages of people of a different gender identity are rising. In 2021, the part-time and full-time percentages for people of a different gender identity were 0.6% and 0.4%, respectively (“2021 Public Library Staff” n.p). While this rise is not extreme, it does show an increase in changing demographics. Considering that the number of gender neutral youth is soon growing up into adults and entering the workforce, this number will likely continue to rise, leading to a wider range of gender identities working in libraries.

In addition to the widening of gender demographics working in libraries, the future of female librarian stereotypes will also continue to evolve. A popular stereotype of female librarians shared through media and popular understanding is that of an older woman, shushing people and being an overall strict presence. While this may have been true at one point in

libraries' past, it is not the present or the future of female librarianship. With the rise of the community-focused library, more people are able to see librarians in their natural habitat, as people-centered and upbeat members of the community. The type of librarian a person might interact with will always depend on the location and demographics of where the library is located, but it remains true that many female librarians are more focused on bringing the community together and lifting up their voice, rather than shushing them to be quiet. While library spaces are still often seen as a place to silently read, research, and relax, the addition of community spaces makes their climate one that is more lively. This, in turn, will rewrite the public's understanding and stereotype of a female librarian. The stereotype will never be entirely erased, because it is a part of the historical discourse surrounding librarians, which should remain; however, it will continue to evolve with the new space.

Technology and AI

The introduction of computers, phones, and various other forms of technology meant many changes for libraries; several of their primary processes and functions shifted with the changing world. Nevertheless, they survived, books stayed relevant, and technology brought a whole new aspect to the library world. AI is the newest form of rising technology that brings into question its use within libraries. Some people have argued that with the rise of AI, libraries will become obsolete. Since AI can answer any question, no need for books in a library, right? But as mentioned above, libraries are much more than that, and they have learned to shift with the times. AI is just the new challenge that librarians will learn to work with. Generative AI services, like ChatGPT, have made the research process more streamlined, with many people turning to it to answer their questions and assist in researching and other information-related services. There

are debates about the ethicality of generative AI for these reasons as well, but in reality, that is how it is being used by the world; so many businesses and services, like libraries, must learn how to interact with it to their advantage.²⁵

In order to use AI to its full advantage, its significant drawbacks must also be acknowledged to avoid misuse. Ever since ChatGPT was introduced to the public on November 30th, 2022 (Marr), the world has been inundated with talk and use of generative AI. Many industries have been affected by these changes, and libraries are no different. AI can be helpful for many people, but it can also be harmful. For libraries specifically, it has proven to be detrimental for several reasons, including decreased use of library research materials and the invention of AI books. Now, when collection librarians are working to purchase books, they have to watch out for AI-made books, which are filled with typos, stock photos, and “strangely worded sentences” (Saleh).²⁶ These books, like the title *Rabbits: Children’s Animal Fact Book*, are being marketed as normal books and not labeled as AI. Not having these books clearly labeled introduces worries for librarians who want their patrons to have real, high-quality books written by human authors. AI books also introduce the issue of copyright and plagiarism. A system called Books3 (Asmelash) has recently come under fire because it has begun using authors' books to train AI, and the authors were never informed nor gave permission to allow this system to do this.²⁷ This system feeds into AI companies like OpenAI and ChatGPT and can use plagiarized material to create new books. Librarians now have to be extra diligent when purchasing new materials due to the increased risk of AI books that may be using real authors'

²⁵ Several different ethical arguments against generative AI include plagiarism, environmental concerns, and a decrease of human creativity.

²⁶ Saleh offers tips in her article for how to recognize AI generated books.

²⁷ The uploading of plagiarized material has become detrimental to authors book sales and recognition. See Leah Asmelash’s article for more information on how AI is affecting authors.

material. Librarians like Susan Dunn would much prefer to stock the original work, rather than an AI-created book that is severely lacking in quality.

However, instead of shunning the use of AI altogether, librarians in the future will learn more about how to use it and how to help other people use it, just like how they have helped people use computers and other forms of technology. AI is the next step for librarians to increase their repertoire of helpful services. According to Harry Pence in his article “Future of Artificial Intelligence in Libraries,” librarians will be able to use AI in a multitude of new ways. He mentions that in addition to how librarians will help the public with AI, they will be able to use the analytical benefits of AI to “allow librarians to monitor not just usage patterns from the past and present but also to provide information about how systems are changing and why these changes are occurring” (Pence 136). So, librarians will be able to use the benefits of AI’s data intake to help them analyze their own business practices and help inform their decisions. Pence also mentions several negative associations with AI, like licensing and copyright restrictions, as well as the function of AI taking over repetitive tasks. He offers counterpoints to show the potential positive effects of AI analysis, with librarians remaining experts on complex topics. The collaboration with libraries and AI will likely take time, but utilizing the benefits of AI or digital connectivity will be increasingly important over time.

Due to the generative effects of AI, after doing the research for all the above points, I thought it would be effective to ask ChatGPT itself what the future of libraries would be and how AI would impact the future of libraries. I found several interesting results. The first response that ChatGPT gave me for a future aspect of libraries is the transition “From Repositories to Community Hubs” (“Future of Libraries”). It briefly explains that libraries will become a “third place” in addition to home and workplace for people of the community to get together. This

aligns with the other observations and research that I have found for one of the most important future features of the library. In addition to this, the other key areas it highlighted were digital integration and hybrid access, makerspaces and innovation labs, curation, not just collection, sustainability and local identity, and the library as a socially ethical institution. Overall, the answers provided by ChatGPT are entirely plausible future effects of libraries; however, in my first prompt it did not provide much background information or potential pitfalls of the information that it gave, at least without any follow-up information. When asked about the future in terms of AI, it provided several different examples of how AI will be used as a tool, including the idea for personalized research assistants and increased accessibility interfaces.²⁸ Notably, in my second prompt on specific AI use in libraries, Chat GPT also mentioned several challenges, mostly surrounding Ethical and Philosophical challenges, indicating that it can recognize the potential pitfalls of AI use in libraries and the negative associations with it, as well as the potential positive effects. Utilizing AI to ask this question was helpful for confirming ideas already previously researched, but it is also not a full, comprehensive explanation for how or why certain recommendations might take place.

Conclusion

By examining the various ways that libraries have been used and valued throughout the past and present while speculating about the future, it can be concluded that libraries are indeed not just a luxury, but a necessity of life, just like Henry Ward Beecher stated. Libraries have come a long way from their beginnings as membership-only libraries in the American Colonies to the widespread community hubs that they are today. Libraries and the librarians who staff

²⁸ When mentioning several different tools AI could be used for, Chat GPT uses the word 'could' indicating that this is not a tool being developed, but an idea that ChatGPT would like to suggest as a potential use of AI.

them have been consistently committed to acceptance and open access to all. This notion will be continuously important in the world for many years to come. People are at their best when they interact with others to improve themselves and the people around them. Libraries create a safe space for this to occur, and they are ever-changing to best support the people and the world around them. From accepting and embracing new technologies to fighting against censorship, libraries work to support the world around them and are a vital piece of society that will remain a consistent presence in the many years to come.

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