

## AS A PUBLIC NEED.

### EVOLUTION OF MODERN LIBRARY IDEA IN AMERICA.

The Sagacious Purpose and Practical Plan of Benjamin Franklin—Books For the People's Use a Conservator of Free Institutions.

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#### IV.

"Promote, then, as an object of primary importance, institutions for the diffusion of knowledge. In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened."—Washington's Farewell Address.

When did the public library movement begin?

Not even the Reformation with its tremendous assertion of the rights of men to spiritual freedom, brought about the change so desired. Apparently it waited for that child of the Reformation, whose ominous name is Revolution, to turn the key which should open libraries to the people.

For surely the spirit of the Revolution, in its sanest manifestations, moved Benjamin Franklin and other men of his kind, in their thinking and acting on political and social subjects, and unquestionably, with Franklin, more than any other, originated the impetus to this movement. In his philosophic brain was conceived the thought of a public library, for the diffusion of knowledge, "to the end that men might be capable of self-direction, and better fitted for freedom."

Franklin was not more sagacious to plan than practical and sensible to execute and organize. In his autobiography he tells how in 1732 the Philadelphia Library Company was established, and how it was the "mother of all the Subscription Libraries." He

says "this library and others established afterward in imitation of ours, have improved the Americans, and have made our farmers and trades-people as intelligent as gentlemen in other countries, and perhaps they have contributed in some degree to the stand, so generally made, throughout the colonies, in defence of their rights and privileges."

When it is seen how naturally and inevitably the public library of Franklin's institution has grown into the more modern form, it is easy to perceive that in the establishment of the subscription library, the modern free public library movement really began. One of the first rules Franklin made was "that the library should be public and gratuitously accessible as a reference library." The old librarian would have been as much shocked at the idea of a patron taking home a book, as the modern curator of a museum would be, if an interested child should ask to carry home a bird of paradise.

Then came the broader thought of lending free to all. But before this came to pass, many unsuccessful efforts were made. In 1847, Mayor Quincy, of Boston, secured the passage of an act to allow the city of Boston to lay a tax to establish a public free library. So the public free library was born. In a few years, similar legislation was secured in almost every State. In 1850 similar legislation was secured in England.

Whatever the forces preparing for this movement were, they wrought effectively, and the people were ready for the idea. Libraries have been established by legislation, and at the same time their growth has been greatly fostered by private beneficence. No other public object seems to attract the gifts and bequests of the wealthy as does this. There has been ready perception of the truth that one's memory cannot better be perpetuated than by association with an institution so popular, and at the same time, so elevating and refining as the public library. And although nothing is more certain than that those who love books are very chary of parting with them, yet in all libraries we find large numbers of volumes have been acquired by gift.

The first State library was established in New Hampshire in 1770. The Virginia State library was organized in 1823. The most thoroughly organized and useful State library of today is the New York State, established in 1818.

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