

ONLINE HEADLINE: Celebrating free public libraries

PRINT HEADLINE: Celebrating public libraries

By Angela Campbell

It's hard to believe there was ever a time without free public libraries. Moline has one. Rock Island, East Moline, and Silvis, too. Just 150 years ago, the concept of public libraries was put on the fast-track in Illinois, thanks to the Great Chicago Fire.

Legislators introduced the bill in 1871 without a lot of fanfare. However, once Chicago lost most of its literature collections to the fire, legislators from that area decided that the law should take effect immediately, thus prompting what is now known as the Illinois Local Library Act, signed into law by Governor John M. Palmer on March 7, 1872.

Why is this something worth celebrating? Prior to the Local Library Act, cities like Rock Island relied on private libraries. These were paid for by sponsorships or annual subscription fees, making literacy and learning available only to the elite. Intellectual freedom is the basis for democratic systems, and public libraries provide the ideas and information to allow everyone to inform themselves. As Lady Bird Johnson once said, "Perhaps no place in any community is so totally democratic as the town library. The only entrance requirement is interest."

Thanks to the Local Library Act, Illinois public libraries are now funded with truly equitable access through the local library tax. The Local Library Act declares that "Every library and reading room established under this act shall be forever free to the use of the inhabitants of the city."

The act was very clear. When a town made the decision to establish a library, a board of nine directors "chosen from the citizens at large with reference to their fitness for such office" was to be selected, with no more than one city council member on the board at any time. The board was charged with creating rules and regulations for governing the library, as well as the expenditure of all proceeds garnered from the "Library Fund," collected from a specified tax levy.

Additionally, the library board had the power to construct a library building, appoint a librarian, and carry out the "spirit of the act."

Rock Island Public Library was not the first Illinois city to establish a public library board — that honor goes to Elgin. However, through our research we have found that Rock Island Public Library was the first to open for business as the first tax-supported public library in the state of Illinois. That status was made possible by a private group, the Young Men's Literary Association (YMLA), which volunteered to donate its pre-existing collection and librarian, Miss Ellen Gale, to the future public library.

Rock Island City Council appointed the first library board of trustees at their meeting on Oct. 12, 1872. This board established a room at the former Mitchell & Lynde Building on the 1700 block of 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, and moved furniture and books into the site on Nov. 7. Finally, the Rock Island

Public Library opened its doors to the public on Nov. 25, 1872, all made possible because of the passing of the Local Library Act, and the actions of public-spirited Rock Islanders who wanted a truly public library.

We are proud of our longevity, and hope that you share in our excitement as we celebrate our sesquicentennial year. Our year-long celebration begins in October 2022 with our annual Frieze Lecture partnership with Augustana College at the Downtown Library. A committee of local interested parties and partners has been meeting for many months to plan great programs and events for the celebration. We look forward to sharing more about our public library history as the year progresses. Please stop by anytime to learn more.

**TAGLINE:** Angela Campbell is library director of the Rock Island Public Library. Background for this article was quoted from the Illinois State Library Heritage Project.