

In 1878, the Library Company moved to a new building funded by a bequest from Dr. James Rush (1786-1869) at Broad and Christian Streets. The Library Company remained at that location until 1965, but it also operated a branch more convenient to its members at Juniper and Locust Streets from 1880 to 1939. The Library Company moved to 1314 Locust Street in 1965.

Over its long history, the Library Company's directors and shareholders have included many notable Philadelphians. In the institution's early years, shareholders included surveyor Benjamin Eastburn (d. 1741), silversmith Philip Syng, Dr. Thomas Cadwalader (1707-1779), schoolmaster Francis Alison (1705-1779), builder-architect Samuel Rhoads (1711-1784), secretary Richard Peters (1704-1776) of the Governor's Council, and a bit later the merchant-patriot Charles Thomson (1729-1824) and John Dickinson (1732-1808), the "Pennsylvania Farmer."

Women had also been part of the Library Company from its founding, using the privileges that came with their male relatives' shareholding. For example, Mary Langdale Coates paid to maintain her deceased husband's share from 1749 to 1770. The first women to be named as shareholders themselves were Susanna Carmalt and Sarah Emlen, who both had been shareholders in the Union Library Company and therefore gained Library Company shares when the two institutions merged on April 6, 1769. A third woman, Sarah Wistar, was approved as a Library Company shareholder just a few weeks later.

To date, no evidence has been found in the collection to indicate whether the Library Company either welcomed or turned away Philadelphia's growing Black community or other people of color. However, at least up through 1881, the Library Company's list of shareholders included none of the prominent Black men who had the type of wealth and strong civic connections that typically opened doors to shareholding.

Despite its subscription model, the Library Company served as "the City Library" or "the Philadelphia Library" until the late 19th century.

It became the de facto Library of Congress when the First Continental Congress met in 1774 below the library's rented rooms in Carpenter's Hall, and it continued in that role until the nation's capital moved from Philadelphia to Washington, D. C. in 1800.

It remained the largest "public" library in the U.S. until the 1850s.

After the Civil War, the position of the Library Company and similar American subscription libraries slowly shifted. By the time the Free Library of Philadelphia opened its doors in 1895, the Library Company was struggling to maintain its membership. However, its collections remained a key asset. In the 1950s, the Library Company pivoted to become a scholarly research library focused on its early American collection.

FURTHER READING:

At the Instance of Benjamin Franklin: A Brief History of The Library Company of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 2015).