

At best they had been a few bookcases of theological works, and their cultural impact on the communities in which they had been set up had not been great.

It remained for Franklin and his friends to hit upon a scheme which would meet the needs of the ambitious man whose purse was limited and who had not enjoyed a formal education. The subscription library, in which the shareholders pooled their resources to secure the greatest number of books for their common use, proved to be the answer. The members benefited not only through borrowing privileges but through a choice of books attuned to their wants. So successful did the Company prove that other localities established similar institutions, and by the time of the Revolution there were many library companies and societies scattered throughout the colonies. It was Franklin's opinion that "these libraries have improved the general conversation of the Americans, made the common tradesmen and farmers as intelligent as most gentlemen from other countries, and perhaps have contributed in some degree to the stand so generally made throughout the colonies in defence of their privileges."

Certain it was that as the Library Company of Philadelphia grew, chiefly by purchase, partly by gift, it became *the* library of Philadelphia, a significant and permanent part of the city's intellectual resources. In a broad sense it was a "public" library, for while circulation was restricted to members, others were able to use books in the library. Franklin referred to the Company as "the Philadelphia public library," and others testified to its predominance

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