Libraries: Civic Commons of Democracy

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The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what “courageous citizenship" is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: "We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: "I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture."

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Abstract

Libraries have promoted an informed citizenry and bridged divides as cornerstones of democracy ever since Benjamin Franklin founded the Library Company of Philadelphia in 1731. Today's libraries serve as civic commons, not only promoting unfettered access to a broad array of ideas but also catalyzing a more engaged citizenship.

Introduction

In this moment when citizens struggle with democracy under siege they also seek to transcend polarization and cynicism. Among the most trusted institutions in virtually every locality, libraries have stepped forward to conceive new ways to address the daunting issues dividing the country. Across city and town, school and campus, libraries renew civic life by serving as a commons where community members come together to learn, build collective knowledge, and nurture understanding and empathy. When they convene civic dialogue, libraries also empower a new generation of active citizens. As they reimagine their roles in the public sphere, they have transformed from transactional service providers to active co-creators of the civic life of their communities.

This essay showcases both historic and contemporary stories that illustrate the ways libraries promote civic renewal and bridge divides in the promotion of democracy. It offers examples of libraries as stewards of an informed citizenry, then demonstrates the transformation of these institutions as they have assumed a more catalytic role in shaping the civic life of contemporary communities. Across the nation, libraries stand in defense of the public's right to know and the freedom to read. They stand firmly against censorship that threatens the public's right to receive information. At the same time, many work to bridge divides in communities by convening dialogue across differences. As civic commons, libraries welcome every community member without bias and protect access to unpopular ideas as they encourage their constituents to seek common ground in a safe (and brave) space. Today's libraries not only promote free expression but also advance a more engaged citizenship.

The History of Libraries as Public Forums

A young Benjamin Franklin founded the Library Company, America's first lending library, on July 1st, 1731, forty-five years before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The inspiration for this subscription library came from the Junto or "Leathern Apron" Club, a "society of mutual improvement" established by Franklin four years earlier with a group of friends who met weekly to discuss issues of the day. Members who brought books to share and consult during their debates found it too cumbersome to bring them back and forth, so they agreed to retain the books in their meeting room for the benefit of all the members. They could take the books home to read, thus creating the first lending library for the purpose of supporting public dialogue. Books from Franklin's library served the delegates to the First Continental Congress in September 1774 by providing access to every significant work of political theory, history, law, and statecraft held in the American colonies; and thereby fueling the debates that led to the Declaration of Independence. (Library Company of Philadelphia 2015).

A century later, towns in New England established public libraries, beginning with Peterborough, New Hampshire in 1833, the first library supported by municipal taxation that granted free access to all citizens. Boston followed in 1848, the first large free municipal library founded on the democratic principle of providing free knowledge to all. Hailed as a "palace for the people," it pioneered lending services, branch libraries, and children's rooms to ensure universal access to education. By the late 19th century, public libraries expanded "the educational process where the schools left off and by conducting a people's university, a wholesome capable citizenry would be fully schooled in the conduct of a democratic life," according to Sydney Ditzion (1947, 74), who concluded that the early public library "not only answered the criteria inherent in the democratic premise but also offered an instrument as responsive to varying social requirements as democracy itself" (Ditzion 1947, 51). By the 1920s, the concept took hold that libraries, as informal education centers, advanced democratic ideals (Learned 1924). In 1927, Julius Rosenwald, President of Sears, Roebuck and Company, set up a fund to build not only 5000 schools, but also 10,000 libraries for African Americans in the South (Johnson-Jones 2019). As civic scholar Harry Boyte describes them, these Rosenwald libraries and schools, which thrived until school desegregation later in the century, became "citizenship schools" whose key organizers, Jeanes Teachers,[1] taught "habits, practices, and skills essential for democratic renewal" (Boyte 2024, 55)--instrumental to the civil rights movement and development of a generation of civic leaders including John Lewis, Maya Angelou and Medgar Evars.

Just before World War II, when the future of democracy was uncertain, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt sent a welcome message to librarians attending the annual meeting of the American Library Association, stating, "Libraries are directly and immediately involved in the conflict which divides our world… because they are essential to the functioning of a democratic society" (Roosevelt 1941, P-18). Following the war, libraries facilitated public discussions on the meaning of American democratic traditions, which provided ideal opportunities to spread "reliable information on all sides of this vital issue and for the encouragement of free discussion and action" (quote by Ruth Rutzen, Chair of ALA's Adult Education Board, in Preer 2008, 3). In 1951, The American Library Association (ALA) launched the American Heritage Project with funds from the Ford Foundation, where local libraries hosted discussion groups about democracy and free speech, envisioning libraries as "guardians of democracy and freedom" (Alvarez 2021, 80). That same year, ALA distributed election information and organized discussion groups and other activities to increase voter turnout, offering citizens "an experience of democracy as well as a consideration of it" (Preer 2001, 151). The New York Public Library, which described itself as "an institution of education for democratic living," joined a nationwide voter turnout campaign with the Ad Council's slogan, "*Listen, Read, Look, Talk, Argue, Think and Vote.*" Stated the project's leaders, "Let us all make our libraries active community centers for the spread of reliable information on all sides of this vital issue and for the encouragement of free discussion and action" (Preer 2008, 3).

As returning veterans started families and moved to the suburbs during that period, an anti-Communist movement led by Senator Joseph McCarthy advocated censorship and attacked the mission of libraries. In response the American Library Association joined forces with the Association of American Publishers to issue, a strong defense of the "Freedom to Read," stating:

> The freedom to read is essential to our democracy… Most attempts at suppression rest on a denial of the fundamental premise of democracy: that the ordinary individual, by exercising critical judgment, will select the good and reject the bad… We believe that these pressures toward conformity present the danger of limiting the range and variety of inquiry and expression on which our democracy and our culture depend… The power of a democratic system to adapt to change is vastly strengthened by the freedom of its citizens to choose widely from among conflicting opinions offered freely to them. To stifle every nonconformist idea at birth would mark the end of the democratic process… We believe rather that what people read is deeply important; that ideas can be dangerous; but that the suppression of ideas is fatal to a democratic society. Freedom itself is a dangerous way of life, but it is ours (ALA/AAP 1953).

Reinforcing the views of librarians and publishers, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, speaking at the Dartmouth College commencement, exhorted students:

> Don't join the book burners. Don't think you're going to conceal faults by concealing evidence that they ever existed. Don't be afraid to go in your library and read every book, as long as any document does not offend our own ideas of decency. That should be the only censorship. How will we defeat communism unless we know what it is, what it teaches, and why does it have such an appeal for men, why are so many people swearing allegiance to it? It's almost a religion, albeit one of the nether regions. And we have got to fight it with something better, not try to conceal the thinking of our own people. They are part of America. And even if they think ideas that are contrary to ours, their right to say them, their right to record them, and their right to have them at places where they're accessible to others is unquestioned, or it's not America (Eisenhower 1953).

McCarthy's movement shriveled, but librarians confronted the persistent threat of censorship with a new ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom and the formation of the Freedom to Read Foundation; ever since, librarians have united to fight for these fundamental free expression freedoms. Until recently, ALA recorded several hundred challenges to library materials annually, but in this decade challenges soared 10-fold over the last five years, mostly led by organized pressure groups and legislatures eager to limit youth access to materials that explore themes about race, gender identity, sexuality, immigration, and religious diversity (ALA 2026c). In the last few years, many states have passed legislation to ban such "offensive" materials for young people in public and school libraries, and some have even criminalized librarians if they have purchased or maintained materials that some find inappropriate for young people. The flip side of censorship is privacy and here, librarians have also stepped up. "Everyone has the right to privacy and confidentiality in their library use, no matter their origin, age, background, or views. When users recognize or fear that their privacy is at risk, they lose the freedom to explore ideas…The right to privacy means being able to seek information in person or online without fear of judgment" (American Library Association 2025b). As they did in the 1950s, librarians continue to promote the free exchange of ideas and privacy protection as they bravely combat censorship and the surveillance of readers.

Just as librarians turned more attention to censorship and privacy, they suspended library-sponsored democracy projects after the McCarthy era, which paralleled the pattern described by

Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone* (2000) when major demographic shifts and social upheaval left Americans less familiar and trusting of their neighbors. In the new century, librarians joined the movement for the revival of civic life (Molz and Dain 1999; McCook, 2000; McCabe 2001; Kranich, 2001; Schull, 2004; Willingham 2008; Kranich 2012; Kranich 2020). According to Nancy Kranich, "the key role of the library as an information commons for engaging citizens and encouraging participation in community life" (Kranich 2003, 279) followed trends articulated by leading civic scholars such as Harry Boyte (1989; 1996) and Peter Levine (2007). Libraries resumed hosting deliberative forums in partnership with the National Issues Forums (NIF), on Long Island and across the country in Nevada, California, Oregon and other states (National Issues Forums 1993). The Kettering Foundation supported the launch of an ALA Public Policy Institute, with libraries convening NIF forums across the country from Des Moines and Virginia Beach to Johnson County, Kansas, and Rutgers University-Newark.

Libraries as Contemporary Public Forums

> "At a time when democracy is under siege and citizens struggle to transcend polarization and cynicism, Americans seek new ways to address the daunting issues dividing the country. Libraries – among the most trusted institutions – empower citizens and bring communities together by playing a catalytic role that renews civic life, builds collective knowledge, nurtures understanding and empathy, fosters partnerships, and shares leadership. Libraries not only inform but also engage citizens in safe as well as brave spaces" (Kranich, 2024b, 1).

All types of libraries—public, academic, and school—have seized the moment to reimagine their civic role. Many have embraced new partnerships that redefine their mission, where they fit, and their sphere of influence in their communities. Librarians have shifted the paradigm from providing services *to* their communities to working *with* them by turning outward and strengthening relationships with their constituents. Libraries now shape and lead discussions, decisions, and strategies that encourage active and meaningful civic engagement, as well as leverage "their existing education capacities to increase knowledge about civic responsibility and broaden participation skills," moving "from supporting players to valued leaders in today's civic engagement space…[that will] broaden their impact as the go-to resource for building a culture of enlightened, engaged, and empowered citizens,…" well positioned to "transition to civic engagement leader as both necessary and long overdue"…with the "stature as democracy's best promise" (Urban Libraries Council 2011, 2, 4). Today's public, academic, and school libraries have transformed from collection-focused to engagement-centered (Kranich et al. 2020), adopting a new narrative that embeds them within their communities and realigns their civic missions in partnership with such organizations as the International City/County Management Association, the Aspen Institute, CIRCLE, and Campus Compact.

Librarians have built upon their commitment to close the civic literacy gap (Kranich 2024a) by fostering information and media literacy to instill students with a sense of civic agency so they can become "co-creators of a democratic society" (Boyte 2007). Sara Jane Levin, a school librarian at the Urban School in San Francisco, created a multi-year framework to develop student critical civic literacy skills—"skills that help our citizen students recognize how to enhance service work and become agents of change in a democratic society" (2016, 31). At the

Hume-Fogg High School in Nashville, librarian Amanda Smithfield launched a ProjectCiv program where diverse students learn how to discuss controversial issues in civil dialogues where they seek common ground (Smithfield 2024). Also focused on youth, the Clinton Presidential Library in concert with the National Archives offers "Civics for All of Us," which helps build civic literacy and engagement with programs and resources (Clinton Presidential Library n.d.).

At William Paterson University in New Jersey, librarians work with the office of Campus Activities and Student Leadership (CASL) to participate in service learning and the Model UN and Political Science Club to help students earn credit towards their Civic Engagement Badges (Marks 2018). The Government Information Services Department at the University of Illinois Libraries serves as an effective entry point into deeper civic inquiry by embedding an array of approaches to connect students with democratic principles, campus and community stakeholders, and opportunities for meaningful civic participation that ground civic learning in real-world applications of constitutional rights (Sung 2025). Kansas State University Libraries have worked with the school's Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy to convene forums, including one it named, framed and convened related to broadband deployment in public libraries (Han, Schenck-Hamlin, Schenck-Hamlin 2015). In Georgia, the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library teamed up with the Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies at the University to convene forums at libraries around the state (Thompson 2014). The newly established Rutgers Democracy Lab launched a Common Grounds project at the University's Alexander Library in New Brunswick, enabling students an opportunity to deliberate together and transform library spaces into hubs for engagement across differences (Rutgers Democracy Lab 2026). College and university librarians have also participated in professional development opportunities offered through organizations like the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' (AASCU) American Democracy Project (ADP), and Campus Compact (Kranich 2019).

Public libraries across the country have also sponsored civic programs offered by the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI), the National Coalition on Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD), Everyday Democracy, and Braver Angels, among others. The Civic Lab at the Skokie Public Library encourages participation in moderated civil discussions on contentious issues (Iasevoli 2018). The Memphis Public Library Civic Commons has positioned the library "as a convener and facilitator of conversations to address community challenges" as part of its Reimagining the Civic Commons initiative (Hallman 2020; Hallman 2024). In Hoboken, New Jersey, the library's Let's Get Civic series in partnership with Voter Choice New Jersey and Uniting for Democracy has introduced residents to ranked choice voting (Lissner 2026). To train more library leaders in multi-partial facilitation, the Urban Libraries Council has joined forces with Everyday Democracy as part of its new initiative: Promoting Civic Discourse in North American Library Systems (ULC 2026).

Many public libraries now work with Braver Angels to teach skills to disagree better. The Wright Library in Oakwood, Ohio, sponsored a full-day workshop with the Oakwood Inclusion Coalition as part of its Let's Talk Program Series (Wright Library 2023). The Montgomery County, Maryland, Olney Public Library aired the film, "Braver Angels: Reuniting America," for public

discussion (Olney Public Library 2026). In Wyoming, the State Museum and the Laramie County Library System have co-sponsored an annual Civic Season in concert with the League of Women Voters and Braver Angels (Wyoming State Museum 2025). In Spokane, the library hosted Braver Angels workshops aimed at bridging political divides and fostering empathy for people with different beliefs and launched Civics Salons to bring people together to discuss political issues (Webjunction 2023a). The Westport, Connecticut, Public Library worked with its state public broadcasting network and Braver Angels to discuss building bridges across political differences and encourage civil discourse (Connecticut Public 2023). Also worth noting, Braver Angels itself hosted a debate: "Resolved: Don't ban or censor books at schools or public libraries for patrons sixth grade and older" to consider the controversy playing out in school and public libraries (Braver Angels 2023).

Nationally, library associations have focused extensively on civic issues, reflecting the growing concern about the decline of our democracy. For more than two decades, the American Library Association has trained librarians in dialogue and deliberation techniques and has named and framed issues of common concern to librarians; one, "Who Should I Trust to Protect My Privacy?" convened by libraries around the country, focused on a topic of particular concern to the library community. ALA's Libraries Transforming Communities initiative, launched initially in 2014 as a partnership with the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, has coached several thousand librarians to engage more deeply in the civic life of their communities. More recently, ALA also partnered with the National Coalition on Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD), Everyday Democracy, Living Room Conversations, and other groups that convene and moderate community conversations. These efforts, often in partnership with others around the country, have accelerated in response to the rise in threats facing the nation's democracy. In 2026, ALA published in concert with NCDD: Libraries as *Leaders in Bridging Divides--Bridging Divides Facilitation Guide* & *eCourse* (American Library Association 2026a). Other library organizations--both national and state--have pioneered similar efforts, including the Urban Libraries Council, which launched its Bridgebuilding initiative in collaboration with Webjunction and IREX (Webjunction 2023b), and the Association of Research Libraries, which hosted an Executive Leadership Institute in October 2025 on "Cultivating Civic Engagement (Association of Research Libraries 2025). One of the stalwarts of the movement to build democracy in communities, Richard Harwood, President of the Harwood Institute, explained his extensive involvement with libraries throughout the United States and Canada,

"My interest in libraries is that they're essential to the civic life of communities, and… libraries still have a great reservoir of trust in communities that a lot of community and public institutions no longer have…I think they're essential right now to helping us rebuild our sense of connection to one another, and the ability of communities to come together and solve problems together" (Peet 2015).

Conclusion

We live in polarized times. Yet, as they have done for hundreds of years, libraries continue to serve as vital hubs of connection—places for people to gain access to ideas and their safe (and brave) exchange. As "third spaces," libraries welcome everyone to gather, learn, and engage in meaningful dialogues—community conversations that focus on understanding rather than

winning and exploration rather than debate. They establish the conditions for building bridges across differences and the capacity for citizens to work together to address their shared challenges and strengthen their bonds. Such initiatives have harnessed the power of dialogue in local communities, led by libraries as catalysts for change in partnership with other organizations committed to strengthening communities and democracy.

Rooted in communities since the 18th century, librarians recognize that, in these times, threats to democratic practices require more urgent responses. Hence, many have stepped forward to embrace opportunities to bring communities together as trusted, local institutions committed to freedom of information and the public's right to know. Their experience protecting free expression has reinforced the importance of elevating the voices of all community members. Librarians must not only double down and champion the freedom to read but also embrace opportunities for people to come together to listen to each other, to exchange ideas, to uncover shared aspirations, and to find common ground.

As the nation celebrates its 250th birthday, we should commemorate and extol the founding of our greatest ideas—in particular the library, that most essential democratic institution. So let us reimagine the role libraries may play in fomenting civic discourse and ensuring our most treasured liberties—the freedom to read, view and listen. For nearly 300 years, America's libraries have remained a cornerstone of democracy.

> "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." --Benjamin Franklin (Franklin 1771-1790, 136).

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[1] Jeanes teachers, who numbered more than 2,300 black educators, were funded by a grant in 1906 from Anna T. Jeanes, a wealthy Quaker woman in Philadelphia (Noland 2009).