



A Brief History of the Library



Collections of written knowledge were originally kept in what was called a *repository*. (*Reposit* means *to put away or store*. Think *deposit* which is similar in meaning.)

Written knowledge did not always mean books. Before books, there were clay tablets, and archeologists have discovered that the Mesopotamian people collected thousands of them in a repository more than 5,000 years ago! (Mesopotamia was an ancient region of southwest Asia in what is now modern-day Iraq.)

Archeologists have also uncovered collections of ancient papyrus scrolls that date back to 1300 B.C. (Papyrus scrolls were made from a grassy plant, and were used by Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans.)

The ancient Greeks promoted the idea of repositories through their keen interest in literacy and intellectual life. Collections in repositories began to grow because the Greeks encouraged authors to write on a variety of subjects, which copy shops then made into books.

These copy shops were not Kinko's! Copying books was done by hand, and (as you can imagine) it took a lot of care and concentration to make a copy exactly right. How accurately a book was copied was called its "trustworthiness". (Imagine accidentally leaving out the word *not* in the following sentence: *The emperor decided not to attack*. As you can see, a book's *trustworthiness* was very important!)

The repositories did not have shelves like our modern libraries do. The scrolls were kept in little slots, or pigeonholes, with their titles written on wooden tags at the openings.

There were various jobs to be had inside a repository. It was a great honor (and position of power) to serve as the *director*. Scrolls from the tagged pigeonholed shelves were fetched and returned by people called *pages*. They transported the scrolls in leather or wooden buckets. *Scribes* made copies of works to be added to a library's collection, and recopied scrolls that had been damaged.

But these repositories (or libraries) were only available to scholars and scientists. "Ordinary" people were not welcome. You could not just go down to your local repository and check out a scroll!

During the Renaissance era (14th-16th centuries) wealthy people in Europe began building their own private libraries. It became a status symbol—if you were rich, you had a library!

It was Johann Gutenberg's 1450's invention of moveable type that changed bookmaking forever, replacing handwritten books with printed ones and making them more readily available.

There were many libraries established throughout Europe, but the oldest library in America started with a 400-book donation to a new university in Massachusetts by a man named John Harvard. (See how valuable books are? They named the university after him!) The first *public* library in the United States opened in New Hampshire in 1833. In the late 1800's and early 1900's, wealthy businessman Andrew Carnegie built and equipped over 3,000 public libraries in the United States.

Over the ages, libraries have been destroyed by wars, fires, and floods, but they have been rebuilt and expanded as a necessary and valuable repository of knowledge.

