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Ben Franklin Did This Too?

The comprehensive book of Benjamin Franklin's writings, among many works about him, is "Franklin: Writings," published by The Library of America (1987) in a signature high quality hardback. It is scholarly, being one of more than 300 like volumes among The Library of America's self-described "definitive collection of America's greatest writers." In it are moral and political essays of Franklin's, articles, bagatelles, letters, speeches, "Poor Richard's Almanack" (1733-1758), and his "Autobiography" (written from 1771 to nearly his life's end).

"Franklin: Writings" was assembled by J.A. Leo Lemay (1935-2008), Professor of English at Delaware University and author/editor elsewhere about Franklin. A career editing task this book itself might be, as it runs to 1605 pages. It is not typical bedtime reading, at least not in its entirety, perhaps more a reference volume for many readers. But it is certainly less daunting if digested one well defined part at a time. Still, better for bedtime might be Walter Isaacson's "Benjamin Franklin: an American Life" (2003), which uses "Franklin: Writings" as one its many resources. Isaacson's work is a more traditional biography. In both books, however, you will find a few pages, just a few pages, about Franklin's launch of the first American public Library.

In a centennial year for Murrysville Community Library, at the very least, that launch is foundational context. Our community Library was launched in 1922; Franklin's formalized Library Company of Philadelphia was incorporated in 1731 when he was only 27.

Franklin had initially formed a club called Junto, with a membership made up mostly of poor Philadelphia tradesmen. Franklin himself was a relatively poor printer at this time. Junto was something of a discussion and debate group, with members taking turns in writing topical essays.

In that period of time, there was a dearth of good booksellers in places outside of Boston, such as Philadelphia. New books were usually ordered from London, not at all so quickly done with lengthy shipping times by boat. So, sharing of books was desirable, and the Junto club began to do that in a hired room that it acquired for its use. Franklin wrote that this "repair'd in some Degree the Loss of the Learned Education my Father once intended for me." The habit he developed was to spend one to two hours each day in the Junto clubhouse reading books. That sounds like someone using a "Library," right! And users could borrow from the collection for home use.

This initial sharing of books led somewhere along the way to the idea of a subscription Library, with subscribers being charged upkeep and collection-building dues with the right to borrow books from the clubhouse. Forty shillings to join and ten shillings per year thereafter. The subscription Library was the first of its kind in America. Membership in it was codified by said incorporation as the Library Company of Philadelphia, an entity which continues to exist in even our day.

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This man, Franklin, of the Constitutional Convention for which Philadelphia is better known, was an amazingly productive human being during his long life, 1706-1790. He became a renowned writer in his time, and achieved fame as well as civic leader, scientist, statesman, and philosopher. Somehow, early in his life, before he got started in his most serious endeavors, he left his imprint for public Libraries as well. His story is truly remarkable even without that, but he did that too!

Charles B. Greenberg
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