

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

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Dedicated library trustees have been instrumental in the development of public libraries in British Columbia, within a framework developed by provincial government legislation.

In 1836, the first travelling library in the province was initiated by Dr. John McLoughlin of Fort Vancouver; in 1859 a library was established in Fort Hope. The year 1864 brought the Cariboo Literary Institute and the Mechanics' Institute of Victoria Public Library, the forerunner of the present Greater Victoria Public Library.

These early undertakings established the pattern for B.C. public library development in the nineteenth century. Public libraries were founded by locally organized non-profit societies which were financed from voluntary contributions or from borrowers' fees. Free library service was the exception rather than the rule, in the days before public library support from tax revenues.

The British Columbia Free Libraries Act of 1891, modeled on the 1882 Free Libraries Act of Ontario, was passed to remedy this situation. This statute permitted communities to establish free public libraries, supported by a locally derived special tax, which was administered by a locally appointed board of trustees.

However, the provisions of the Free Libraries Act soon proved inadequate to meet the needs of British Columbians residing outside the cities of Vancouver and Victoria. To address this problem, in 1898 the province inaugurated a system of travelling libraries to serve the rural areas of British Columbia.

In 1919, in response to widespread popular pressure, a new Public Libraries Act was passed. This created a Public Library Commission whose function was the supervision of all public library services in the province. The Commission assumed responsibility for the travelling libraries, grants to municipal libraries and the promotion and extension of library service. In addition, it encouraged the formation of new public library associations throughout the province.

In 1927, the Public Library Commission sponsored a major province wide survey of public library conditions and needs. One of its principal recommendations was the establishment of a rural library service, like the county library systems in the United States and the United Kingdom. A new structure, the union library district, was established. This resulted in the creation of the Fraser Valley Union Library in 1934 and the Okanagan Union Library and the Vancouver Island Union Library in 1936.

Throughout the 1970's larger units of service for public libraries were encouraged. In 1972, the Public Libraries Act was amended to permit the establishment of two new library organizations: federated public library systems and integrated public library systems. The Greater Vancouver Library Federation, a federated public library system established in 1975, and the Cariboo Thompson Nicola Library System, an integrated public library system which began serving two regional districts in 1976, were until 1994 unique examples of their kind.

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In 1987, the New Approaches Ministerial Task Force on Public Libraries was established, with a mandate to review the provision and delivery of public library service in British Columbia. Its attention was focused on five specific areas: funding, organization and regulation, the Library Services Branch, a provincial resource library, and continuing opportunities for joint development.

The resulting recommendations were summarized in the Task Force's final report, *British Columbia's Public Libraries: A New Approach*, issued in 1988. The thrust was to "encourage the development of a strong library in each community and a cooperative approach among all libraries. We believe that this can be achieved only through local commitment and initiative coupled with provincial support, leadership, and coordination."

A review of the Library Act was begun with a discussion paper in 1990. This was followed by *Public Library Legislation: a White Paper for public Review*, released for public comment in January, 1993.

A new Library Act was adopted on June 30, 1994. The purpose of the Act was to encourage the extension and use of public library service throughout B.C. by providing for the establishment and operation of municipal libraries, regional library districts and library federations and allowing existing public library associations and integrated public library systems to continue to operate and to support improvements in public library service. Omitted from legislation was the means for the establishment of more Public Library Associations or Integrated Library Systems.

The new Library Act also established free basic library service by prohibiting library boards from charging for basic library service. Basic service is defined as admission to the library and use of materials on site and borrowing library materials that are normally lent. This right is limited to residents and electors of any area served by the library board.