

## Towards a Geography of Public Libraries, 1850-1980

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### Abstract

Using Louis Round Wilson's *The Geography of Reading* as a starting point this research investigates the spread of the public library from 1850 through 1980. Wilson's first question was:

What is the extent of inequality in access to libraries and library resources among the states and regions of the United States?

Wilson was asking the question of his own time. *The Geography of Reading* was published in 1938, although the question had been on Wilson's mind since at least 1904. His starting point was his concern that the South, as a region, lagged far behind the rest of the United States.

This research extends Wilson's question longitudinally, investigating the period from 1850 until 1980. Founding dates for 7,557 public libraries extant in the mid-1990s were collected and entered, by state and town, into a spreadsheet. This was certainly not all the libraries that existed at any given time, but the libraries listed were the ones strong enough to survive as viable institutions.

Four time periods were chosen to provide snapshots of the state of the public library, and its relationship to the population being served.

**1850** is the last Census year before establishing the model (Boston Public Library) for the modern public library. The idea here is to see what libraryland looked like at the dawn of the new era.

**1890** The modern form of the public library had been up and running for roughly 35 years. ALA had been founded, the *1876 Report* unleashed, the profession was growing, and the long economic upswing after the Civil War was making for relative prosperity, nationwide. 1890 was also the last year before major amounts of Carnegie money started pouring into libraryland. There had been only four Carnegie grants prior to 1890, so we can argue that the major impact was yet to come.

**1920** World War I, and the library experience therein had considerably widened the horizons of the library profession. Librarians had started looking

out beyond the development of the technical apparatus of librarianship and had started to see the social possibilities as well. More to the point, the Carnegie grants had ceased in 1919- the last going to American Fork, Utah. 1890 and 1920 are the bookends of the Carnegie Era.

**1950** The Great Depression and World War II are over, and the almost 30 years of unparalleled economic growth have started. 1950 is also the last census year before federal money, funneled through the *Library Services Act* of 1956, and the *Library Services and Construction Act* of 1966 will have an impact on the development of libraryland. Up to this point, except for some help from Carnegie and other rich benefactors, communities wishing libraries have largely done it on their own.

**1980** By 1980 the great flood of *LSCA* money has receded somewhat. The economic hard times (relatively speaking) brought on by Vietnam, Lyndon Baines Johnson, and Richard Milhaus Nixon, have started to take hold. Until well into the 1990s there will not be a lot of new libraries established. Library systems and other consolidations also make data collection rather less straightforward after this time.

For each time period the total number of public libraries in each state was compiled. The U.S. Census provided the total population of each state. The dependent variable, *Population served* was calculated by dividing the total population of the state by the number of libraries extant. Results were separated into ranked groups of five using the statistical technique Jenks Optimization, or Jenks Natural Breaks that establishes natural breaks in the data rather than an arbitrarily imposed scheme. The resulting maps are based on the breaks established by Jenks.

The results show that by 1890 the public library had a foot in almost every state, or territory that would become a state. Growth of the public library between 1890 and 1920 greatly increased availability of library services. Not all of that growth is attributable to Carnegie grants, however. Wilson's concern about the South, at the time he wrote, was well founded. By 1980 the variance in library availability had decreased nationwide to the point where the South, as a region, was still somewhat behind other regions, the disparity was significantly reduced.

This research presents a broad brush longitudinal framework of the development of public libraries between 1850 and 1980. Differences between states and regions are noted. It is hoped that future researchers will use this framework to investigate the development of public libraries in individual states, or regions to shed further light on the question of variation in the development of public libraries. Or, in a somewhat larger context, to consider the second question that Louis Round Wilson posed in 1938:

What relation does this inequality bear to variation in the distribution of social, educational, and cultural institutions and media for the communication of ideas in America?

For anybody interested in future research, I will provide a copy of the data set used to produce this presentation.