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# America's Greatest Libraries

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## Introduction

Libraries have always stood at the crossroads of knowledge, community, and culture. In the United States, these institutions have charted a remarkable journey over the centuries, from modest collections in colonial America to vast repositories that rank among the greatest in the world. Much more than mere buildings filled with books, America's greatest libraries reflect the nation's evolving values: an unyielding belief in education, open access, and the preservation of collective memory.

The story of libraries in America is inseparable from the nation's democratic ideals. Rooted in early experiments with publicly accessible collections and solidified with the widespread establishment of tax-supported public libraries in the 19th century, America's libraries set a global standard for openness and inclusivity. The Boston Public Library can proudly claim to be the country's first large free municipal library, but it did not stand alone for long. Visionaries, philanthropists, and civic leaders across the country soon realized the transformative power of libraries—spaces where anyone, regardless of background or means, could broaden their horizons.

Defining what makes a library “great” is no simple task. For some, it is the breathtaking scale of collections like those found at the Library of Congress or the New York Public Library; for others, it is the rarity and depth of special holdings, the architectural grandeur of the buildings, or the vital role a library plays within its community. Greatness might also mean adaptability—a willingness and ability to meet the needs of new generations through digital innovation, community outreach, or the preservation of local heritage. This book approaches “greatness” as a rich tapestry woven from these threads, shining a spotlight on twenty-five remarkable libraries that each tell a distinct story.

Within these chapters, readers will wander the marble halls of national landmarks and step into soaring contemporary spaces of glass and steel. They will discover libraries that have weathered wars, fires, and censorship, emerging as resilient guardians of knowledge. From presidential archives to specialized centers dedicated to medicine, law, or African American culture, each institution represents a unique chapter in the American story. Along the way, the architecture, collections, and the creative minds behind these libraries come into focus, revealing the civic optimism and intellectual ambition that have always propelled American libraries forward.

Yet, even as we celebrate these giants, we recognize they sit at the apex of a far broader landscape. In communities large and small, public and academic libraries serve as lifelines—especially for the vulnerable or marginalized—offering not just books but Internet access, job resources, and a safe haven for ideas. In an age of

digital transformation, libraries have shown remarkable resilience. They are at once preservers of tradition and laboratories for the future, grappling with both opportunity and challenge as technology reshapes how we seek, share, and safeguard information.

“America’s Greatest Libraries” invites readers to explore the extraordinary institutions that have shaped—and continue to shape—the fabric of American intellectual and cultural life. By examining one library per chapter, this book celebrates not only their individual stories, collections, and achievements, but also the enduring values they embody: freedom of thought, equal access to knowledge, and the belief that libraries belong to everyone.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: The Library of Congress: America's National Treasure**

Perched majestically on Capitol Hill, a stone's throw from the beating heart of American democracy, stands an institution unlike any other: the Library of Congress. It is not merely the nation's oldest federal cultural institution, established in 1800 with a modest \$5,000 appropriation for books for Congress, but also the de facto national library of the United States and, by most measures, the largest library in the world. Its origins are as intertwined with the nation's founding as the very laws it helps to inform.

The initial collection, intended solely for the use of Congress, was housed within the Capitol building itself. This arrangement, while practical for the legislators it served, proved tragically vulnerable during the War of 1812. In August 1814, British forces advanced on Washington D.C., and in a devastating act, set fire to the Capitol, consuming the nascent library's collection in the flames. It was a profound loss, a symbolic strike against the young nation's burgeoning intellectual life.

Yet, from these ashes arose a pivotal moment in the library's history, one that would forever shape its character and scope. Thomas Jefferson, having recently completed his second term as president, possessed an extensive personal library at Monticello. Recognizing the critical need to rebuild the congressional collection, Jefferson offered to sell his entire library to Congress. This was no small offering; his collection comprised 6,487 books, a far more comprehensive and diverse array than the original legislative focus. On January 30, 1815, Congress approved the purchase for \$23,950, a significant sum at the time. Jefferson's wide-ranging interests—from philosophy and history to science and literature—introduced a universal collecting principle that would become a hallmark of the Library of Congress.

Although a fire in 1851 in the Capitol would again claim a portion of the collection, including many of Jefferson's original books, the foundation for a truly national library had been laid. The library's growth was further spurred in 1870 when a new copyright law was enacted, centralizing the copyright registration process at the Library of Congress and requiring that two copies of every copyrighted work published in the United States be deposited there. This singular act transformed the library into an unparalleled repository of American creativity and knowledge, ensuring that its collections would organically grow to reflect the nation's output across all formats.

By the late 19th century, the library had significantly outgrown its space within the Capitol. Ainsworth Rand Spofford, who served as Librarian of Congress from 1864 to

1897, was a key figure in advocating for a separate, larger building and for the library to serve the public, not just Congress. His vision propelled the movement for a new structure commensurate with the library's growing importance. The result was the Thomas Jefferson Building, a magnificent edifice that opened its doors in 1897.

Designed by the architectural firm of Smithmeyer and Pelz, the Jefferson Building is a stunning example of Beaux-Arts architecture, a style characterized by its grandeur, symmetry, and opulent ornamentation. Inspired in part by the Paris Opera House, the building was conceived as a "palace for the people," a monument to American intellectual and cultural achievement. Its exterior, faced with granite, features elaborate carvings and sculptures, including portrait busts of celebrated writers. The building's dome, originally copper and later gilded, is topped with the "Flame of Knowledge."

Stepping inside the Jefferson Building is an experience in itself, a journey through marble halls, vaulted ceilings, and spaces adorned with murals and mosaics that tell stories of history, knowledge, and civilization. The Great Hall, with its soaring columns and intricate detailing, immediately conveys the building's intended purpose as a temple of learning. The crowning glory is the Main Reading Room, a breathtaking octagonal space beneath the central dome. Over a hundred feet in diameter, it is surrounded by multiple levels of book stacks and features desks where researchers can immerse themselves in the vast collections. The artistry within the reading room, including allegorical paintings and classical statues, underscores the library's dedication to the breadth of human knowledge. The Jefferson Building was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1975, recognizing its significant architectural and cultural contributions.

As the 20th century progressed, the Library of Congress continued its relentless growth. The increasing volume of acquisitions, particularly through copyright deposit, necessitated additional space. This led to the construction of two more buildings on Capitol Hill, adjacent to the Jefferson Building: the John Adams Building, completed in 1939, and the James Madison Memorial Building, which opened in 1980. The Adams Building, designed in the Art Deco style, provides a striking contrast to the Beaux-Arts grandeur of the Jefferson Building. The Madison Building, the largest of the three, is a more modern structure, housing a significant portion of the library's collections and offices, including the U.S. Copyright Office. Together, these three buildings form a complex that occupies a prominent place on Capitol Hill.

The sheer scale of the Library of Congress's collections is difficult to comprehend. It is consistently ranked among, if not definitively, the largest libraries in the world. While exact numbers fluctuate as new items are constantly added, the library holds approximately 173 million items. This includes over 32 million cataloged books and other print materials. But books are just a fraction of its holdings. The collections encompass a staggering diversity of formats, reflecting the library's universal

collecting policy. There are over 74.5 million manuscripts, chronicling personal lives, historical events, and the creative process. The library holds over 5.6 million maps, a cartographic treasure trove spanning centuries and continents. Its music collections include 8.2 million pieces of sheet music, along with millions of audio recordings. The visual arts are represented by over 17.3 million visual materials, including photographs, prints, and drawings. Even comic books are part of the collection, with over 12,000 titles.

The collections span over 470 languages, with particular strengths in materials from regions around the world. The Law Library of Congress, for example, is the largest law library in the world, providing comprehensive resources on U.S., foreign, comparative, and international law. The Rare Book and Special Collections Division holds the largest rare book collection in North America, including one of the few perfect vellum copies of the Gutenberg Bible and Thomas Jefferson's rough draft of the Declaration of Independence. The Asian Division alone provides access to over 4 million items in nearly 200 languages and dialects.

While its primary mandate is to serve the U.S. Congress, providing research and analysis through the Congressional Research Service and the Law Library, the Library of Congress also serves the public, scholars, and other libraries. It is a vital resource for researchers from around the globe, who utilize its reading rooms to access its unparalleled collections. The library issues reader cards, allowing anyone aged 16 and older to use the collections on-site for research purposes.

The Library of Congress plays a crucial role in administering the nation's copyright system. The U.S. Copyright Office, located in the James Madison Memorial Building, is part of the Library of Congress and is responsible for registering copyright claims. This function not only protects the rights of creators but also serves as a vital mechanism for the library's acquisition of materials, contributing significantly to the growth and diversity of its collections. The public can search copyright records, providing a historical trace of creative works in America.

In the digital age, the Library of Congress has embraced technology to expand access to its collections. Initiatives like the National Digital Library, which began as American Memory in 1990, aim to digitize and make available online vast portions of its holdings, from historical manuscripts and photographs to sound recordings and films. These digital collections allow people worldwide to explore the library's treasures without having to visit Washington D.C. The library's website, [loc.gov](http://loc.gov), serves as a gateway to its online resources, including legislative information through [Congress.gov](http://Congress.gov).

The Library of Congress is not just a static repository; it is a dynamic institution that engages with the public through exhibitions, concerts, lectures, and other programs. These events showcase the richness and breadth of its collections and reinforce its

role as a national cultural center. The library also serves as the national center for library service to the blind and physically handicapped, providing accessible formats of materials.

Managing a collection of this magnitude presents unique challenges, from preservation and conservation of fragile historical items to the sheer logistics of housing and providing access to millions of items in diverse formats. The library employs a staff of over 3,000 to manage its operations, from cataloging and conservation to research services and public programs. The selection of materials to be added to the permanent collections involves careful review by subject experts.

The Library of Congress stands as a powerful symbol of America's commitment to knowledge, creativity, and the free exchange of ideas. Its history mirrors the nation's own journey, marked by destruction and rebirth, challenges and innovation. As the largest library in the world and the de facto national library of the United States, it continues to fulfill its mission to support Congress, further the progress of knowledge and creativity, and provide access to a rich and diverse source of information for the benefit of the American people.

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