



## After the Fact | [The New American Library](#)

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### TRANSCRIPT

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*[Intro music]*

**Dan LeDuc, host:** So, when was the last time you went to the library? Was it for a book? A movie? Even a toy? Was it for an exercise class, or maybe it's one of the few places where you are able to access the internet?

For the Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and you're listening to "After the Fact."

Libraries aren't just about books anymore and haven't been for a long time. But they've always been about the democratization of information, thanks to Benjamin Franklin. It was about this time of year, on July 1, 1731, that Franklin created the first free lending library in Philadelphia. It signaled a real change in the world: that America, not yet its own country, was a place where information could be available to everyone.

*[Transition music begins in the background]*

Turns out that concept has become a cherished one. The Pew Research Center reports that 78% of Americans say public libraries provide information, and—here's the key part—information that is trustworthy and reliable. That's no small thing in this digital information age, when many people are also saying they have trouble sorting fact from fiction.

Sounds like something worth talking about—and celebrating. And joining us to do just that is Carla Hayden, the librarian of Congress, the 14th person and the first woman and African American to serve in that role.

**Dan LeDuc:** So, Carla Hayden, welcome. It's a delight to talk to you.

**Carla Hayden, 14th librarian of Congress:** Thank you. This is a great time to talk about libraries.

**Dan LeDuc:** This time of year, this podcast likes to talk about the importance of certain American institutions and how they've made our country great. Here we are, right around the Fourth of July, that's when everyone is paying attention to the Declaration of Independence, and that's an important thing. But there's another big American holiday that people may not realize: on July 1 back in 1731, when Ben Franklin created the first library in this country. Back in those days, what was the stated goal of a library, and how, if any way, is it different than the goals today?



**Carla Hayden:** Benjamin Franklin, if you remember, was a bookseller and a lover of books. And at that time, books were very rare and very expensive, and they could only be obtained with great difficulty. And so Ben Franklin wanted to have a membership society: the Philadelphia Library Company. And he started the idea of a lending library. And it was in this time—they weren't a nation yet, but it was starting—and the idea that information and ideas should be free and not class-bound. So, that library was created not for scholars or the rich or for one class, but for people who wanted to share books but could not actually afford to have their own.

**Dan LeDuc:** And as time and the decades progressed, the other Founding Fathers—Thomas Jefferson being one of them—recognized the need for the institution that you now head, the Library of Congress. It's the biggest in the world, for one thing. Why was there this decision back then to create a Library of Congress, a national library of sorts?

**Carla Hayden:** 1815, the British destroyed the U.S. Capitol, and there were about 1,200 legal books there for Congress. And I've been told and even shown the fireplace in the Capitol where the British actually used some of those books, those initial books, to start that fire.

And at that time, Thomas Jefferson, the great collector of books, had the largest personal collection of books in the country at that time, had retired to Monticello, and he offered to sell his collection to the country to start the Library of Congress, and it included the Quran. It was a universal collection. The idea that Congress needed more than just legal books. And as he said, there's no subject to which a member of Congress may not have an occasion to refer.

**Dan LeDuc:** This democratization of information was—the whole democracy notion was pretty new in the world in those days. How important is the free flow of information and the library's role in our democracy?

**Carla Hayden:** Libraries have been almost bastions of equal opportunity to information. The idea that anyone could have access to books and what, more importantly, was contained in them was the great equalizer and unifier in many ways. Now, there were difficulties in this country, as you could imagine, in the Jim Crow South. There was the segregation of public libraries, like other public facilities. And that was something that even carried over into some of the northern states that had, as they called them, colored branches and actually were designated that. But that idea of a library being a place, as librarians like to say, where books could battle it out on the shelves—you put a book about one thing there and the possibly opposing idea book that described another idea right next to it, and let the public decide—that was democracy in action. And also, the idea of an informed citizenry. That, if you wanted to, you could get the information, and it was free.

**Dan LeDuc:** Before you were at the Library of Congress, you were running the Pratt libraries in Baltimore. Why libraries? Why did you become a librarian?

**Carla Hayden:** I was an accidental librarian. After I graduated from undergrad with political science and history, I was trying to figure out what I would do next. And as I was



going from job interview to job interview, I would stop at my favorite place, the Chicago Public Library, Central Library, and while I was there, a young man who had just graduated with me said, 'Hey, Carla, you here for those library jobs? They're hiring anybody.' And he meant anybody with an undergraduate degree. And I thought, oh, wow. OK. And I went upstairs and then got a position, library associate. And I think about it now strategically, cosmically placed with the young lady who was going to the University of Chicago Graduate Library School. And she was wearing jeans and she was on the floor doing story time with children with autism. And I thought, oh, this is different. And then that's how I really was introduced to what librarianship could be, beyond just ordering books.

**Dan LeDuc:** Maybe some institutions in this country might be under assault for whatever reason, but libraries, people like them. The Pew Research Center says that something like 8 in 10 of Americans will say that they know they can go there for trustworthy and reliable information. That's a pretty good record.

**Carla Hayden:** And trustworthy. In this information age especially, a trusted source of information, that you know that when you go to a public library or a library on a campus or a library in an elementary school that a person that is there to help you is not there for riches, obviously. We call ourselves, librarians, the original search engines.

But the idea that the librarian is there to give you unbiased access to information is something that has, I think, held libraries in communities in a trusted space. And that's even more important now when people are wondering, where's this information coming from? Who's generating it? And so that's what librarians are trained to do, to look at how the information is being produced and who's producing it.

**Dan LeDuc:** When did libraries start becoming more than books and magazines?

**Carla Hayden:** When you think about library history in this country in particular, the concept of publicly supported public libraries started after the Civil War in the 1860s and '70s, when public education became a concept that communities would fund education, and public libraries started then. They also at that time provided different types of services, especially for immigrants that were coming in: language acquisition, in terms of English classes, things like that. So, libraries have provided special services throughout their history of being in communities. And then it really took off in the 1960s when there were activist librarians who were saying, we are part of the solution for community issues. And I was part of that group of seeing libraries as part of community empowerment.

When you think about what happened in Ferguson, Missouri, there was a young librarian—he had only been on the job three weeks—scout's honor. And he turned that library in Ferguson, Missouri, into the school system for the area, food services, everything. The public library became that center for their place.

**Dan LeDuc:** That speaks to how librarians probably have evolved. So, have librarians changed as libraries have changed?



**Carla Hayden:** Well, actually, they've always been as they were called not too long ago, Feisty Fighters for Freedom.

**Dan LeDuc:** I like that.

**Carla Hayden:** Yes. We had T-shirts for that one. Right after the Depression in the 1930s, libraries opened up newspaper rooms. And that's where people who were not employed would go, and they were there all day. And so, the idea of being a place of safety, a place that people could be in and not feel pressured has been a strong part of the librarian's story.

**Dan LeDuc:** You are the first African American, the first woman, to be the librarian of Congress. Has the job become an important platform, then, to talk about some of the things we're talking about?

**Carla Hayden:** Being the first female was very significant in a feminized profession where 85 to 90% of the workforce in a profession is female. And I must tell you, that created a little excitement in the library world.

Being a person of color, though, was personally very significant, because people who looked like me were forbidden to learn how to read, or punished. And people who taught slaves, in particular, to read were punished. Frederick Douglass talks about that in his autobiography. So, those two things I think were personally and professionally very important.

**Dan LeDuc:** I wanted to ask you about Frederick Douglass, because I did read that if his owners didn't want him to have it, that must mean something good for him.

**Carla Hayden:** Yes.

**Dan LeDuc:** And he meant information.

**Carla Hayden:** His famous saying is, "Once you learn to read, you'll be forever free." And Alberto Manuel, in his *History of Reading*, has an entire chapter called forbidden reading. He says the slave owners, dictators, and other illicit holders of power have always known an illiterate crowd is the easiest to rule. And if you cannot prevent people from learning to read, the next best recourse is to limit its scope.

**Dan LeDuc:** Well, of course, beyond the pandemic, which has affected library operations, the nation's undergoing a very tumultuous and serious conversation about race that has been long needed. What's the role of a library, the Library of Congress or just cultural institutions, museums in this national conversation that's getting underway?

**Carla Hayden:** To help bring context to the discussions: When certain historic references are made, we have the documents. We can show, for instance, Frederick Douglass—the Library of Congress has his papers. And I was able to just accidentally, again, take out a file that was bone-chilling in a way, because he was discussing the



impact of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and the shame that happened when the people who owed him so much, as Frederick Douglass said, the colored people, were not allowed to pay tribute in Washington, D.C., and view his body.

And you could see in his handwriting the way he emphasized it with the ink that he was assassinated, murdered, killed for what he did to the colored people. So, being able to put those things into historic context and provide the information to show the documents to really let people decide for themselves.

**Dan LeDuc:** So, where are libraries headed from now? They look radically different than Ben Franklin's days. They look radically different than when I'm sure you started your career. What will libraries look like in another half-century?

**Carla Hayden:** Well, library thinkers are really working on that now. And there's a wonderful article that just came out in *American Libraries*, that's our professional library, about what the future holds. And it really focuses in on the trends in technology. What about drones? What about delivery things? Already artificial intelligence, as well as being these virtual spaces for community. And so, you have a group of librarians who are really saying that we have to think about the future in a way that's exciting, expansive, a little threatening in terms of library as physical place, and, also, do we have any role in ecology? And so, it's an exciting time and another recruitment tool. Getting younger people, because you're imagining a world but with the same values of being a trusted source, a trusted resource in a world that is obviously changing at a pretty rapid pace, using technology as a tool, not as a substitute.

**Dan LeDuc:** Well, Carla, this has been a real pleasure. I'm one of those kids who grew up in libraries too, like afternoons on end, sitting there, and I always felt librarians were these unsung heroes. So, talking to you is like getting to talk to a hero. Thank you so much.

**Carla Hayden:** Well, thank you. And there are librarian superheroes. We have that T-shirt too.

*[Music transition]*

**Dan LeDuc:** As we mark the Fourth of July, it might be worth remembering there's a lot to celebrate during this time—like July 1 and the beginning of the democratization of information, thanks to your local library. If you'd like to learn more about the history of libraries and especially the Library of Congress, please go to [pewtrusts.org/afterthefact](http://pewtrusts.org/afterthefact). And while many libraries are closed or offering limited hours during the pandemic, don't forget many of their services are available online.

As always, thanks for listening. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc.

*[(Female voice over music) "After the Fact" is produced by The Pew Charitable Trusts.]*