

*A toast to Ben Franklin  
and America's first public library . . .*

# Sense Is Preferable to Sound

By James C. Baughman

**T**HE YEAR 1790 marks the midpoint of the social, or private, library movement in New England. It also marks the creation of the

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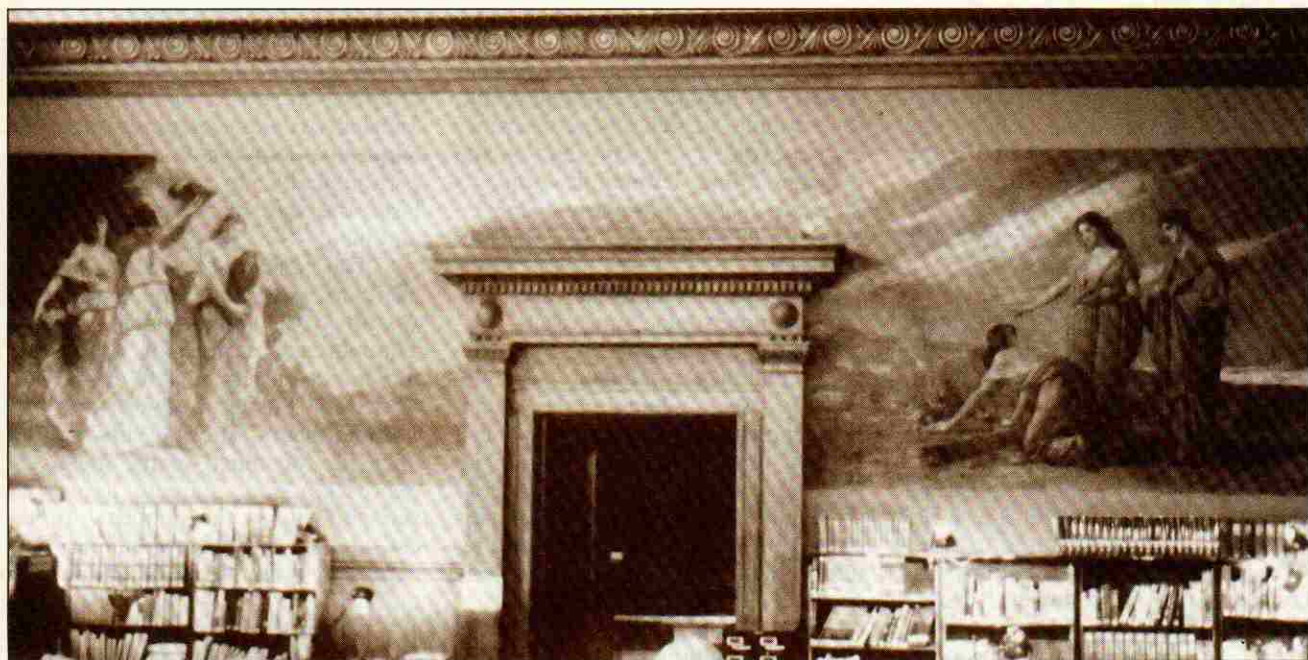
first public library in this country in Franklin, Massachusetts. How did this happen?

A bill before the Massachusetts legislature in 1778, requesting the incorporation of a town about 30 miles southwest of Boston, specified that the town's name be Exeter. As was often the case, the legislature chose the name—Franklin. (Names of early patriots and statesmen were a rich source for town names.) With the defeat of General Burgoyne at the battle of Saratoga, the French were persuaded to ally themselves with the colonists. Benjamin Franklin was America's minister to the Court of

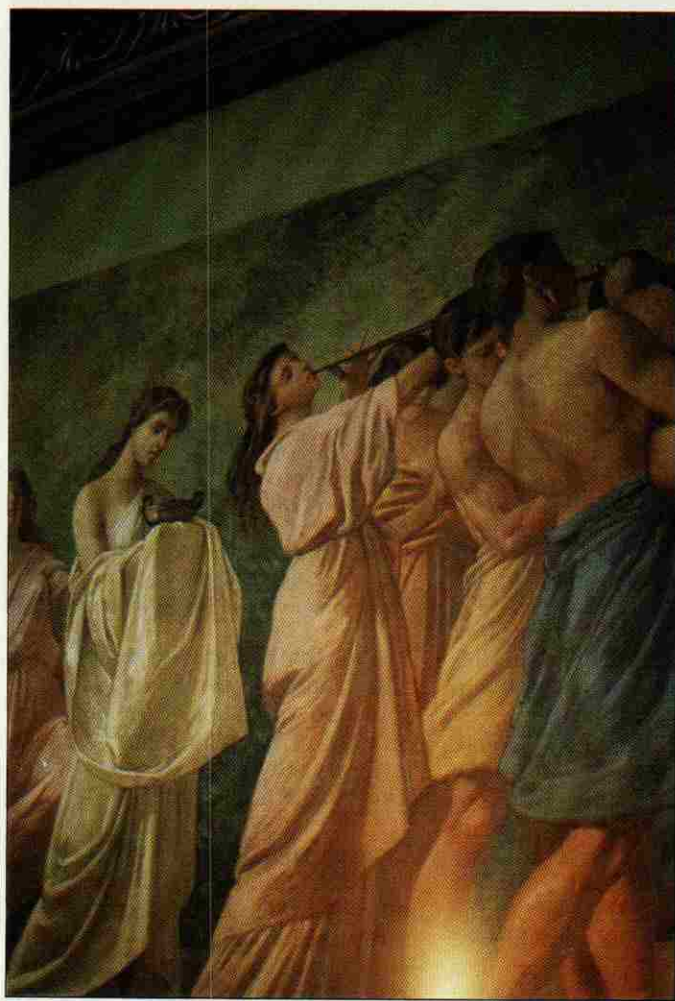
France during and after the Revolution, and towns throughout the colonies took his name.

## More sense than sound

In 1785, scarcely before the town of Franklin, Massachusetts was ten years old, someone (although it is not known who) approached Franklin when he was still minister to the Court of France, suggesting that he donate a bell for a new meeting house in the town. Being the wise man he was, Franklin recognized that "sense" was preferable to "sound" in a country that had struggled so hard to achieve freedom over tyran-







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ny. He respectfully declined to donate the bell; instead, he offered a library collection and asked his good friend Rev. Dr. Price of England to select and forward the books.

The original letter to Price has been lost; a presumed original copy was found in France.<sup>1</sup> It reads as follows:

Passy, Mar. 18, 1785.

My dear Friend,

My nephew, Mr. Williams, will have the honour of delivering you this line. It is to request from you a List of a few good Books to the Value of about Twenty-five Pounds, such as are most proper to inculcate Principles of sound Religion and just Government. A new Town in the State of Massachusetts, having done me the honour of naming



itself after me, and proposing to build a Steeple to their Meeting House if I would give them a Bell, I have advis'd the sparing themselves the Expense of a Steeple at present, and that they would accept of Books instead of a Bell, Sense being preferable to Sound. These are therefore intended as the Commencement of a little Parochial Library, for the Use of a Society of intelligent respectable Farmers, such as our Country People generally consist of. Besides your own Works I would only mention, on the Recommendation of my Sister, Stennet's Discourses on personal Religion, which may be one Book of the Number, if you know it and approve of it.—With the highest Esteem and Respect, I am ever, my dear Friend, Yours most affectionately,

B. Franklin<sup>2</sup>

### The first public library

Originally consisting of 116 volumes, the town and parish library collection still exists, currently housed in the Franklin Public Library. The receipt of the library was a memorable



event, but not without some controversy over who had the right to use the books. Soon after the collection arrived, the debate raged in town meeting (the form of local government in New England) whether the entire town or only subscribers could read the books. For more than two years, the controversy continued.

Finally, on November 26, 1790, town meeting voted to lend the books to all inhabitants of the town.<sup>3</sup> This vote by town meeting determined the matter, establishing the Franklin Collection as the first public library in the United States.

The Franklin town meeting vote antedates the vote by town meeting in Peterborough, New Hampshire to create a public library (with state funds) in April 1833. Peterborough may be credited with being the first tax-supported public library, but the Franklin Public Library, partaking of the nature of a public institution, has a strong claim to being the first public

library by virtue of the town meeting vote to make Ben Franklin's generous gift available to all people.

The Franklin Public Library can boast of four distinguishing qualities: 1) the library is the oldest free town library in America created by the townspeople and open to all on an equitable basis; 2) its first books were given by one of America's greatest statesmen; 3) it was managed as a public trust; and 4) its current building, dedicated in 1904, is a historical landmark representing one of the finest classical Greek buildings anywhere. The building itself is constructed of Milford granite from the same quarry as the Boston Public Library.

### Franklin's belief in libraries

Throughout his life, Ben Franklin was an ardent builder and supporter of libraries. In 1731 he and his associates had founded the first chartered social library—the Philadelphia Library Company.

About the importance of lending libraries to society, Ben Franklin wrote in his *Autobiography* as follows:

These libraries have improved the general conversation of the Americans, made the common tradesmen and farmers as intelligent as most gentlemen from other countries, and perhaps have contributed in some degree to the stand so generally made throughout the colonies in defense of their privileges.<sup>4</sup>

It is only natural that his belief in the importance of books and reading would move him to give the books for the town of Franklin. Thus, the public library movement was to grow out of the social library milieu.

### A young reader from Franklin

Little did Ben Franklin realize at the time of his beneficence that one of the greatest American educators, Horace Mann, was to while away some of this youth reading the books

that he, Ben Franklin, gave to the town. Horace Mann, the Father of the Common School, grew up in Franklin, and, like Ben Franklin, he had a firm belief in the importance of libraries to society. Mann once said: "Had I the power, I would scatter libraries over the whole land, as the sower sows his wheat-field."<sup>5</sup>

### The Ray Memorial

Built by the Ray family, the Franklin Public Library building is called the Ray Memorial. It resembles an ancient Greek temple, adhering closely to accepted standards in Greek architecture. The entrance to the Ray Memorial displays a frieze painted by Tommaso Juglaris, a noted Italian painter, in five panels showing the *Hours* in line with Greek mythology. The main reading room decoration is a magnificent 12-foot painting around the four walls titled *A Grecian Festival*, also painted by Juglaris.

Several of Henry H. Gallison's works are exhibited in Memorial Hall and other areas.<sup>6</sup> Gallison was a noted turn-of-the-century landscape painter who was honored by the Italian government by a place in the Italian National Museum.

The Ray Memorial is truly a magnificent treasure befitting the original donor—Ben Franklin—while celebrating the first public library in the United States.

### References

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