

Steven Engelberg

When I was 10 years old, my family moved to Lexington, Mass., the town that proudly calls itself the "birthplace of American liberty." Lexington's village green was the site of the first battle of the Revolutionary War. Every school kid learns the story of the ragtag farmers who confronted British regulars on the morning of April 19, 1775.

Just across the street from the iconic sculpture of John Parker, the citizen-soldier who commanded the local Minutemen, stands the Cary Memorial Library, a modest building with a grey, stone façade and an old-style card catalogue which has its own place in the history of American lending libraries.

I knew none of that when I became a frequent visitor.

Lexington's library was a place of exploration and relative tranquility. My friends and I would ride our bikes through the tree-lined streets to the center of town. I had my own card and I was free to wander through the open stacks, pulling books off the shelves at random. I had moved from Tom Swift to science fiction and I had a particular passion for Madeline L'Engle, the author of a "Wrinkle in Time."

Looking back (with the help of Wikipedia) the plot of this book is an odd jumble of intergalactic travel and Christian theology. A 14-year old girl, Meg, travels through time and space with the aid of a "tesseract," a geometric term for a particular type of cube.

As I moved through junior high and high school, Cary Memorial Library was the inevitable first stop for any research project. (Imagine a world without the internet or instant access to every book ever written.) I spent many hours at the wood-grained tables near the reference library, filling 3 x 5 notecards with densely packed notations and page numbers. (Imagine a world without laptop computers or smart phones.)

Although I was fascinated by colonial history, I had no knowledge of how the library had been created. I assumed it had been in Lexington in some form from its earliest days. That turns out to be far from accurate.

Lexington was first settled in 1641 and incorporated as a separate town in 1713. It took more than a century after that, until 1827, for the Selectmen to create what they dubbed a "Juvenile Library."

The tiny collection of books was the first publicly supported library in Massachusetts and only the second in the country.

Over the next several decades, Lexington's library grew slowly. By 1856, it had only 200 books.

That changed with some help from a wealthy local resident. A few years after the Civil War ended, in 1867, a woman by the name of Maria Cary decided the town needed a much better library. She offered local leaders a gift of \$1000 to buy books. In exchange, the town would have to staff and maintain the existing library building. Ms. Cary proved extraordinarily committed to building a public library. Before her death, she gave the town an additional \$20,000 to build a new home for the books.

Accounts from the time suggest that the library Ms. Cary built was a center of village life. By the turn of the century, it had amassed 20,000 volumes and was lending 30,000 annually. Like our library in Montclair, it has thrived as a public/private partnership, equal parts civic investment and residents' philanthropy.

This is not to suggest that Lexington's library was without problems. The annual report of 1897 noted that some citizens were less than fastidious about returning books. "It would seem that any honourable person would willingly replace a book accidentally destroyed or pay for it," the report said. "But these person have taken notice of requests repeatedly sent to them to have books returned."

Some things are the same everywhere.

-Steve Engelberg is editor-in-chief of ProPublica, the nonprofit investigative reporting newsroom.