

# The History of Public Library Facility Siting

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## Introduction

In light of the highly controversial siting decisions that public and private sector entities must make in today's dynamic environment, library managers can be certain that more rigorous, scientific and defensible theories and models developed over the past few years are not only necessary but also can be successfully applied for solving library siting problems.

Yet use of descriptive criteria remains the primary tactic when selecting sites.

This article lays the groundwork for the implications of continuing traditional, simplistic and haphazard site selection methods that worked in the past, which now demand critical re-evaluation. The article provides a summary of past and present trends in public library facility location, the profession's attitudes and opinions regarding the physical location of facilities and official standards historically and presently available to guide location decisions. The descriptive literature is reviewed in a chronological manner to offer insight into how some views remained and some changed over time. While the review is not exhaustive, the material is representative of criteria espoused and practiced over the past 100 years or so.

## 1800s

The growth of America's public library system did not begin in earnest until after the Civil War. By the year 1899, America was one of the world's leading industrial nations, attracting millions of European immigrants looking for a better life. These immigrants found themselves in a strange culture and often times out of necessity, learning a new language.

To accommodate these transplants, new schools were created to educate and to ameliorate the immigrants' transition into the American experience. Public libraries were developed and built across the country, to further augment and meet the demand for adult education. Some of these libraries (in Massachusetts specifically) were built with taxes authorized for construction of new library buildings in the mid-1850s. During the next two decades, other states passed similar legislation (e.g., Kansas and Wyoming in 1886), while additional libraries were built as a result of Andrew Carnegie's philanthropic decision to help fund the construction of public libraries [1, pp. 5-12].

At the turn of the last century, there were still fewer than ten true public library systems [2, p. 79]. As a point of comparison, currently there are over 9,000 public library systems encompassing more than 16,000 public libraries in the United States.

1. Maxfield, David. "Andrew Carnegie and His Libraries." *Show-Me Libraries* 36 (August 1985): 5-12.

2. Finney, Lance C. "The Library Building Program: Key to Success." *Public Libraries* (Fall 1984) 23: 79-81.