

The Mercantile Library

414 Walnut St. #1100

Cincinnati, OH 45202

Specialty Libraries.

Public libraries have been presented as places that provide a wide range of community, entrepreneurial and economic development services to a wide range of people. Specialty libraries are a bit different. While generally open to the public, many are “members only”.

A more distinguishing feature is the focus of the library’s materials and educational programs. Specialty libraries, such as The Mercantile Library in Cincinnati focuses on a specific business sector, for the advancement of its members.

Since 1835.

[From their website,

<https://mercantilelibrary.com/about-us/>]

The 45 young merchants who started the “Young Men’s Mercantile Library Association” in the then frontier city of Cincinnati understood the value of networking as well as information and knowledge. They sought both intellectual and moral self-improvement. Education was a means to higher rungs on the young republic’s social and economic ladders. Books and study were also an alternative to the bar room and the street.

Subscription libraries like this sprang up across North America following the example of The Library Company of Philadelphia, founded in 1731 by Benjamin Franklin and a circle of his friends. By the 19th century, libraries were evolving specific to class and profession. Mechanics Institutes served technical tradesmen. Athenaeums and Society libraries catered to certain classes and social circles. Mercantile Libraries were the domain of the country's emergent merchant class, which grasped the usefulness to their profession of a well-rounded education.



The chief instigator behind founding Cincinnati's Mercantile Library was a junior partner in the grocery firm of Worthington and Ranney, one Moses Ranney, a boarder at the Dennison Hotel. He and his fellow bookworms started with \$1800 and 700 books. They first met over a fire house, then rented a room near Pearl Street, the site of the city's first public market.

In the beginning, they struggled to build a membership that could pay sufficient dues to meet their costs, but as their ranks and collection grew, the library found stability and commodious quarters in the Cincinnati College Building on Walnut Street. From there it would grow to influence the region's cultural, commercial, and literary landscapes, hosting prominent lecturers and counting among its members men, and beginning in 1859 women, who went on to leave their indelible mark on the city and region.



10,000 Years at 414 Walnut

Picture a smoky, book-lined room, mahogany desks strewn with newspapers. Steamboat whistles and streetcar bells intrude on the air of quiet concentration among the merchants and clerks who come here daily, keen to read the latest news and trends.

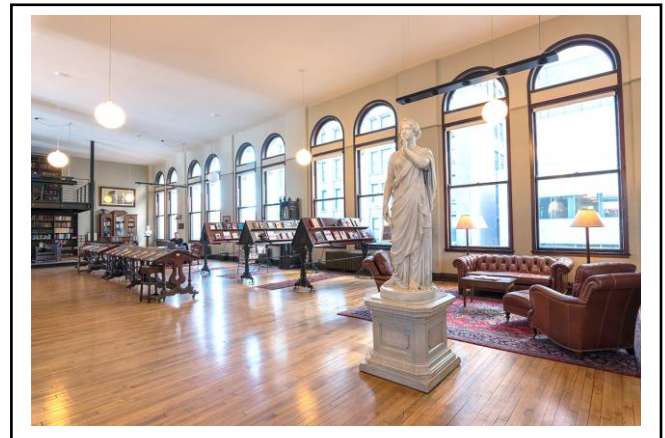
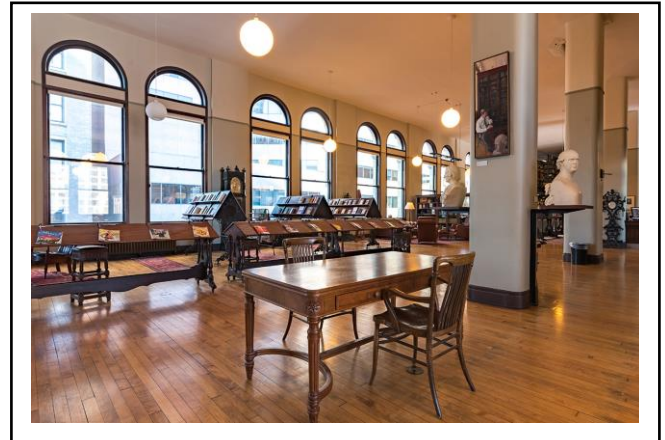
In January of 1845, when fire tears through the building it burns slowly enough that members who live nearby manage to save most of the collection from the flames. By then, the Mercantile Library's members, having set up shop on the major commercial artery of the Westward Expansion, enjoy a degree of success, enabling them to contribute \$10,000 toward rebuilding. In exchange, a ten-thousand year lease is negotiated with the owner, The Cincinnati College. It's thanks to those 10 centuries of pre-paid rent—renewable—that Cincinnati's Mercantile Library has survived, its identity intact, while many similar libraries disappeared or were subsumed by other institutions.

In 1839 the Mercantile Library also founded and provided space for Cincinnati's Chamber of Commerce which in turn established the "Merchant's Exchange", a bureau that expressly collected and disseminated commercial statistics and information: prices, imports, exports, timetables for steam- and canal-boats departures and arrivals.

Here, on August 20, 1847, telegraph promoter Henry O'Reilly installed the first Morse telegraph in the West, carrying vital business intelligence from the coast. The Mercantile Library was now a busy social, cultural, and network-connected hub, central to the economic powerhouse that the Queen City of the West had become.

It survived Civil War, and in 1869, a second fire. At the turn of the century, in the midst of the vertical building boom that gripped the city's central business district, the present-day 12-story

Mercantile Library Building went up, with custom accommodations for the library on its 11th floor. In 1904, the Mercantile Library moved into the current Reading Room, with glass-floored stacks and high, arched windows to admit plenty of light into a library that had been lit, when it began, with oil and tallow.



At 100 years, in the midst of the Depression, membership and circulation dipped dangerously low. During the dark days of a second World War, the Mercantile shipped books to servicemen and -women, and granted library privileges to all military personnel in uniform.



Post-war prosperity brought new diversions to Americans, and the Mercantile Library found itself out of step with the times, struggling to find its identity. It needed fresh members and a reinvigorated sense of purpose. The Board considered selling the library's perpetual lease, and moving. New leadership was needed. It found this in the person of Jean Springer, a former WASP (Women Air Force Service Pilot), hired in 1969.

Conclusions.

Libraries are great assets for economic development programs. When focused on an industry, a trade or an occupation, a specialty library can help small cities and towns retain existing businesses, support their growth and recruit new businesses in a target industry.

Cooperation and coordinated programming with colleges and universities strengthen this approach.

Trade associations find new resources to offer members with printed and digital materials, training courses for internships and apprenticeships, forums for speakers and presentations from allied professions and businesses.

A specialty library, perhaps co-located with a specialty museum, presents an image to the community of stability and commitment to their work. The idea works in communities of all sizes, especially small cities and towns with unique histories or industries.

