

Philly Firsts

The Famous, Infamous, and Quirky of the City of Brotherly Love

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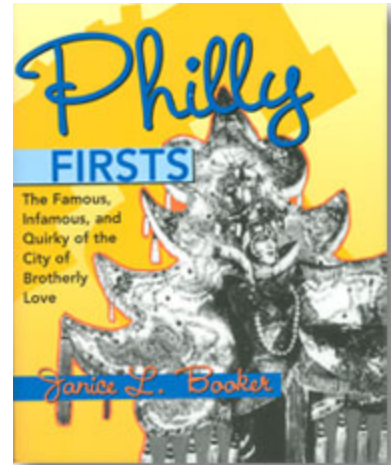
From the Introduction

The famous artist Gilbert Stuart called Philadelphia "the Athens of America" with good reason. Many of our country's first institutions, now centuries old, still exist here: the first public library, the first university, the first art museum, the first hospital, the first zoo, the first art school, the first public school...the list goes on. And let us not forget the many culinary icons that got their start here: Horn & Hardart automat, Tastykakes, Girl Scout cookies, and ice cream.

William Penn imagined his City of Brotherly Love as a "greene countrie towne," and while much of the green has been replaced by concrete and glass, those trees that grace the downtown area are still tall and strong--reminiscent of Penn's vision for a city of homes and thriving commerce. And while William Penn founded the city, it was Benjamin Franklin, more than anyone else, who made it work. Franklin's originality and genius continue to influence science and academic life today. He left us with the Franklin stove, bifocals, the glass armonica, the lightning rod, and the volunteer fire company--all firsts in their day.

READING IS EVERYTHING

Who better than a publisher, writer, inventor, and all-around genius to conceive the idea of a public library? Thanks go to Benjamin Franklin, who, with a group of friends, formed the Library Company of Philadelphia, the first library open to the public (albeit the paying public) on this side of the Atlantic, and the nation's oldest cultural organization.



It started as a subscription library, which meant that people paid a small fee to join, or "subscribe," and use its facilities. Books were initially purchased with annual contributions made by each shareholder. None of the founders deemed themselves sufficiently erudite to select the books, so they asked James Logan, "a gentleman of universal learning and the best judge of books in these parts," to make the selections and purchase them from England. Any "civil gentleman" could come in and read the books, but, much like today's library card holders, only subscribers could take them home.

The library became the de facto Library of Congress, and it remained the largest public library in North America through the middle of the 19th century. Today, it is virtually the only colonial library that remains intact. The library provides exhibitions and public programs of colloquia, lectures, and publications. Its facilities are open to the public.