

Newberry Library – History of the Newberry Library

Edward E. Ayer Library Room, 1943. NL Archives 15/01/03 Bx. 3, Fl.#82.

The Newberry Library was founded in 1887 by a bequest of Chicago land developer and city leader Walter Loomis Newberry (1804-1868). Newberry was an early Chicago resident, arriving in the city in 1833 from Detroit. He quickly became involved in a variety of business ventures, and made his fortune in railroads, real estate, and banking. The young city also counted on Newberry's involvement in other ways: he helped found Chicago's Young Men's Library Association in 1841, served on the city boards of health and education, and was president of the Chicago Historical Society from 1860 until his death.

Newberry's final decade was marked by declining health, and he traveled to France numerous times for medical treatments. He was on one of these regular journeys to France when he died at sea on Nov. 6, 1868. Newberry is buried in Chicago in Graceland Cemetery.

Newberry's will provided for the establishment of a free public library on the north side of Chicago—but only if his surviving daughters died without issue. (At the time of Newberry's death, Chicago did not have a public library. The Chicago Public Library was founded six years after Newberry died, in 1874.) The daughters, Mary Louisa Newberry and Julia Rose Newberry, both died within 10 years of their father. Newberry's wife, Julia Clapp Newberry, died in 1885. Newberry's wishes for a library were finally honored two years later, when half of his estate (\$2.1 million) went towards the founding of the Newberry Library. By this time, the Chicago Public Library was thriving. The Library's first trustees, therefore, decided to devote Newberry's bequest to the establishment of a "library for scholars and people desiring to make careful researches." Over the next few years, the Library's collecting scope was further refined, and the Newberry became dedicated to the humanities.

In those early years, the Newberry Library occupied three temporary locations as plans were made for a permanent building. In 1893, the Library moved into architect Henry Ives Cobb's Romanesque building at 60 West Walton Street, across the street from Washington Square Park. Cobb and the Newberry's first librarian, William Frederick Poole, clashed repeatedly over the building's design, with Poole's plan ultimately victorious. In contrast to his contemporaries, Poole favored numerous small reading rooms filled with books on particular subjects, rather than a large, central reading room and separate book stacks. (Twentieth-century renovations steered the Library's floorplan away from Poole's ideal, and today the Library has two main reading rooms and stores its materials in a separate, closed stacks building.)

Over the next century, Poole and his successors built a world-class collection of books, [manuscripts](#), [maps](#), and other printed materials related to the history and culture of Western Europe and the Americas. The collections span many centuries and feature items such as

[illuminated medieval manuscripts](#), rare early maps, [rich genealogical sources](#), historical sheet music, and the personal papers of Midwest literary figures, Chicago politicians, and others. Each year, thousands of researchers make use of the Library's renowned collections, while thousands more enjoy the many seminars, lectures, performances and exhibits offered by the Library.

The November 1962 Newberry Library Bulletin article, "[The Architectural History of the Newberry Library](#)," by [Houghton Wetherald](#) further discusses the history of the Newberry Library from an architectural perspective.