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## We Love Libraries!

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## *We Love* LIBRARIES!

I will be much obliged if some kind librarian will send me a citation or two along the lines of *A Natural History of the Friends of Libraries Movement in the USA*.

If such a history hasn't been written, it should be. My hypothesis is this: In the United States, citizens have historically been drawn to the idea that reading and books are important. That idea soon expanded to say that a community — whether of like-minded individuals or a political unit — might create a collection of books to be shared and, along with this, a place to share ideas about what those books had to say.

The protagonist in the opening chapter of a Friends history would have to be that amazing American, Benjamin Franklin — printer, editor, postmaster, scientist, revolutionary, statesman, philosopher. And, the father of the public library in America. In 1731 he led a group of Philadelphians in organizing a subscription library. If we pool our resources through a modest membership fee, said Ben, we can assemble a collection of books that will surpass what any individual might afford.

Today's Friends groups — there are nearly 200 in Georgia alone — play an important role across America. They promote public awareness of the role of the community library, and they raise funds to supplement public funds for operation, salaries and programs. Beyond that, they are as individual as their communities are different.

I did a quick Google search using the terms "Friends of the Library" and "history" and wound up with 7,000 hits. Some were born during the Great Depression to preserve and support libraries. Most appeared to emerge in the last half of the 20th century. Friends groups have staying power, make a measurable impact on library programs and services, and represent the best in American volunteerism.

We are in the midst of an economic crisis with sobering

and confusing impact on all of us. Ironically, library use and demand for services are up, while money is disappearing.

Friends in Georgia and elsewhere should not be viewed as the 82nd Airborne parachuting in to rescue the besieged garrison, i.e., the library. Friends have been there for a long time and continue their work at this moment in history.

We asked Friends groups across the state to send us information about their activities in the year. The list so far is long and impressive. The dollar amount is more than \$300,000, and that's probably a figure that doesn't reflect all Friends giving. They are stepping up during the budget crunch to fill particular needs and continue the extras that enrich programming.

In Hart County, for instance, Friends have pledged funds to support purchase of the New York Times top 10 best-sellers. Friends in the Chattahoochee Valley Regional System gave \$25,000 for a new branch library plus \$35,000 for programming and staff support. Calhoun-Gordon Friends played a part in the opening of a downtown, storefront "Book Nook" annex. The successful campaign for a \$275 million library bond issue for the Atlanta-Fulton County system involved active support by Friends groups across the system.

Libraries can and do operate without Friends groups. But Friends long ago demonstrated — like Benjamin Franklin and his colleagues — the positive power of dedicated, organized volunteers. ►►

— **Wally Eberhard**

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