The Development of Libraries

The word library is derived from the latin liber meaning "book"and the latinized Greek word bibliotheca. Its history dates back to 3,000 BC around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers called the Fertile Cresent and also ancient Mesopotamia. Research shows that "archaeologists have unearth papyrus scrolls from 1300-1200bc in the ancient Egyptian cities of Amarna and Thebes and thousands of clay tablets in the palace of King Sennacherib, Assyrian ruler from 704-681bc, at Nineveh, his capital city"(Krasner-Khait, 2001). Despite book burnings and destruction of libraries by fire or wars, libraries were in the forefront of championing information, and throughout history they reflected evidence of people's thirst for knowledge.

In 300 BC, the Great Library of Alexandria, a public library opened to scholars and those with and literary qualifications.

Founded circa 300bc, the Great Library of Alexandria was the most famed literary repository of the ancient world.(Taken from History Magazine 2001)

Public libraries first appeared by the fourth century bc, however, the private libraries were more prevalent. Aristotle, for example, amassed a large private collection. Ancient geographer Strabo said Aristotle "was said to be the first to have put together a collection of books and to have taught the kings in Egypt how to arrange a library."(Barbara Krasner-Khait, History of the Library, 2001)

During 1500 to 1800, there was an increase in literacy and libraries throughout Western Europe. In Germany, town libraries were established providing popular reading for its citizens. Great Britain established municipal libraries in the 1600s and passed the first Public Libraries Act in 1850. Private collections, for example, that of Thomas Bodley provided the basis for the development of Oxford University and the creation and expansion of national libraries.

The first American public libraries began in 1803 in Salisbury, Connecticut. However, it was not until the 1850s that the Boston Public Library was established and publicly supported in the manner that we are familiar with today. American libraries mirrored the growth of those in Europe from 1500 to 1800. Like Europe, many private collections laid the foundation for university libraries such as Harvard and Yale and the national library, the Library of Congress.

Library of Congress, Washington DC (Photo taken from History Magazine, 2001)

It is said that libraries in the Commonwealth of The Bahamas started as early as 1804 with the arrival of the loyalists. Public Libraries in The Bahamas began in 1837 with the establishment of the Nassau Public Library, New Providence, The Bahamas. The Thomas Williamson circulating library and the Nassau Public Library led to the establishment of other libraries in The Commonwealth of The Bahamas.

The establishment of this historic library led to the development of four other libraries during the 19th century in the Family Islands or Out Islands as the islands as they were commonly referred to in the early days. The libraries that followed were Dunmore Town, Harbour Island, 1854, renamed, Sir George W.K Roberts Library, Matthew Town, Inagua, 1855, renamed Erickson Library, New Plymouth Library, commonly known as the Green Turtle Cay Library, Abaco 1862 and Governor's Harbour Library/ Haynes Library, 1897, (Restored in 1996). In 1847, the Nassau Public Library Act was passed followed by the Out Island Library Act in 1909.