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Intellectual Freedom

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The aphorism “Knowledge is Power” (*scientia est potential* in Latin), is most commonly attributed to Francis Bacon of the late 14th century, but its essence has undoubtedly been around far longer. As Maya Angelou’s brother once told her, “All knowledge is spendable currency, depending on the market.”

Beyond its value as “spendable currency,” knowledge—specifically access to knowledge—creates a free and democratic society. The power of knowledge is undeniable; history is replete with examples of society’s elite secreting knowledge from the commoners. Across centuries and cultures, we’ve seen ancient libraries burn, the deliberate withholding of education from African American slaves, and the Taliban keeping girls out of Afghan schools today.

Without equal access to information for everyone, there can be no true intellectual freedom for anyone. Andrew Carnegie believed this, and in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, he donated more than \$60 million to fund over 1,600 free lending libraries in the United States. As a young man, Carnegie could only access the public library by paying a yearly subscription of two dollars—about sixty in today’s currency—an amount he could not afford. After he became the richest man in the world, Carnegie vowed to give people what he valued most: knowledge, and the freedom to access that knowledge without the boundaries created by class.

The Carnegie libraries, stretching from Alabama to Wisconsin, became integral to their communities and stood as symbols of intellectual freedom. They provided not only access to books and information, but *equal* access for everyone regardless of race, gender, age, or socioeconomic status. In areas where segregation was the law, Carnegie built separate library facilities for African Americans.

In the information-rich world we live in today, it would be easy to forget the magic of Carnegie’s far-reaching gift. Imagine if only the wealthy in our society could access the world’s rich histories, or great poets, or transforming narratives. With that in mind, I can think of no better way to celebrate “Libraries across the Lifespan” than visiting one of Carnegie’s Oregon libraries. Of the 31 original Carnegie libraries, ten still function as libraries: Albany Carnegie Library, Ashland Carnegie Library, Enterprise Carnegie Library, Hood River Carnegie Library, McMinnville Carnegie Library, Newberg Public Library, North Portland Carnegie Library, St. Johns Carnegie Library, Union Carnegie Library, and Woodburn Carnegie Library. Visit one and revel in the greatest possible treasure: knowledge. 

