

Library Philanthropy from Andrew Carnegie to Bill Gates

Abstract

Andrew Carnegie is widely recognized as the “Patron Saint of Libraries.” For more than 30 years at the turn of the 20th century, he provided millions of dollars to fund more than 1,600 public libraries. Most of these buildings are still standing, and many still function as public libraries. Arguably, though, Carnegie’s more significant legacy was that he required municipalities to provide annual support. Because of this clever stroke of scientific philanthropy, both public library buildings and public library services survive to this day.

In the 1990s, libraries began to get connected to the Internet and help bridge the “Digital Divide” with public access computers. Bill Gates, the richest man in the world and the Chief Software Architect of Microsoft, established the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and began giving mountains of money and software to public libraries in the form of public access computer packages. In fact, since 1997, the Gates Foundation has invested more than \$250 million for 47,000 PAC packages to 11,000 libraries. That works out to more than \$5,300 per computer.

By strategic philanthropy, the Gates Foundation is assuring the Microsoft’s proprietary programs including Windows and Office and Word and Excel and Access and Powerpoint will be on every desktop. But as every Windows application changes and is upgraded, there is no guarantee that earlier versions will be compatible with future releases. For this reason, our records are in great risk.

In Microsoft monoculture, we are running the risk of putting all of our proverbial eggs—and Word documents and Access databases and Excel spreadsheets and Powerpoint presentations—in one basket. If Microsoft ever flounders, it is extremely likely that all of these records will be lost forever. The Windows of opportunity are closing and the Gates are locking, so librarians and archivists must acknowledge the very fine line between altruism and addiction.

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