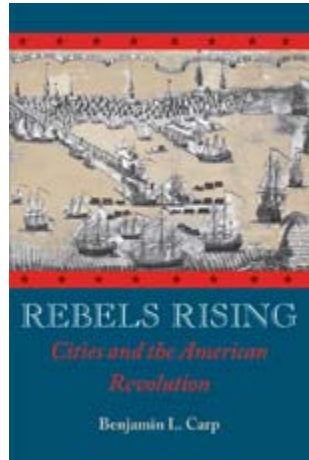


Preserving the Library in the Digital Age (by Ben Carp, Tufts University) | Readex Blog

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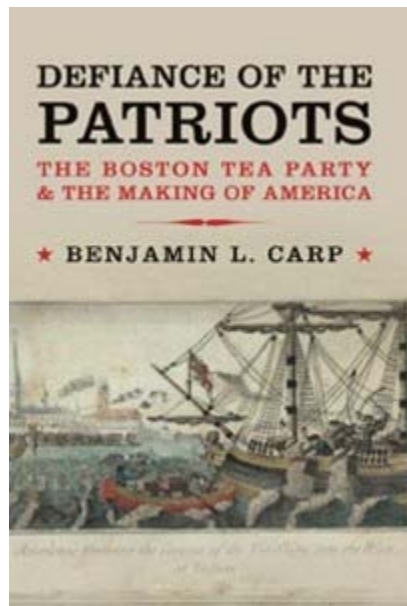
[This article by Benjamin L. Carp, Associate Professor of History at Tufts University, first appeared in the November 2009 issue of *The Readex Report*. Carp is the author of *Defiance of the Patriots: The Boston Tea Party and the Making of America* (Yale University, 2010) and *Rebels Rising: Cities and the American Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2009, paperback edition).



"Inviting to students and general readers, and it will dazzle scholars."--Alfred F. Young, *William and Mary Quarterly*

Librarians, educators, journalists and others often rave about the potential and promise of electronic databases. Let's face it, I rave, too. For my previous book, *Rebels Rising: Cities and the American Revolution*, and my current book on the Boston Tea Party, I have found Readex collections like *America's Historical Newspapers* and *Early American Imprints* invaluable for discovering new sources, learning more about eighteenth-century readers, confirming citations and drawing new comparisons.

I've had a lot of chances to reflect on how I gain access to sources. As a scholar whose sources are over 200 years old, it still amazes me how much I can read without ever leaving my study. Sometimes there are frustrating gaps in the available electronic databases, which can be unwieldy or misleading. Still, on occasions when I need to check a fact or a footnote without leaving my study, they're massively convenient.



Winner of the 2010 Best Book on the Era of the American Revolution Award given by the American Revolution Round Table of New York

Some people look at all the potential benefits of digitization and get ahead of themselves. When all the books and broadsides, newspapers and ephemera, manuscripts and government documents are scanned, they say, there will be no more need for libraries. Science fiction scenarios constantly depict libraries as obsolete relics of an analog age. Yet I for one am not ready to say goodbye to libraries (although, if and when the digital revolution *does* come to a close, I'll be cheering when they line the microfilm readers up against the wall). Even at a research university with access to multiple electronic databases, I'll always feel that libraries are a crucial part of my work and life. Here are a few of the reasons why I hope libraries remain intact for the foreseeable future:

1. Rare or unique archival materials

Sometimes I'll find out, miserably, that a manuscript collection is housed far away in an inconvenient or inaccessible place. It's true that time is tight, not to mention travel budgets—and so it really is tempting to hope that electronic publishers will just put it all online someday and we can save ourselves the trouble. Unfortunately, using scanned manuscripts online can be a nightmare—tough to search, tougher to browse and a pain to read. The only good thing about these poorly scanned manuscripts is that they preserve the originals from our oily fingers. On the other hand, there's much to be said for physical manuscript collections: many are intelligently organized, and so we miss out when we don't consult the collection in person. Finally, we scholars really do benefit from travel and a broader world experience, even if I'm only an early American historian. (London is generally as exotic as it gets.)

2. Browsable stacks

As beautiful and as well stocked as the New York Public Library, the British Library, and the Library of Congress are, I can't quite call them my favorites. These libraries have closed stacks (i.e., you have to call up most of their materials), and I'll always be a stack rat. For me, nothing will ever compare to the serendipitous effect of scanning through the stacks and coming upon a book you never knew you needed. You can replicate this effect to some extent by clicking on the "Subject" of a book you already know in an electronic library catalog, but those categories are never perfect, whereas you can spend all day traipsing through the E's and F's (or the B's and H's and N's and P's...), seeing where your mind takes you.

3. Knowledgeable, experienced librarians

Ever since I was a toddler, librarians have helped lead me to new discoveries. Even as I've become more skilled at locating the information I need, hardly a month goes by when a librarian hasn't helped me crack some impenetrable vault (a faulty catalog entry, a confusing collection, a seemingly vanished item) to get to a resource I need. They do know things the rest of us don't, either about their specific holdings or about gathering information more generally. Most of the librarians I've met really take joy in helping out scholars, students, budding young readers and other patrons. I really wish my students spent more time talking to these folks than I suspect they do.

4. The buzz of studious patrons

Libraries are places of quiet contemplation and (now with the rise of in-house coffee shops) active conversation. The *frisson* of other people working helps me work in turn. I've never been much of a coffee shop writer—I feel like I'm renting the table, hot liquids and laptops don't mix, the caffeine high will eventually crash and the vibe just isn't the same. In fact I usually do most of my writing in a home office—but I'm always pleasantly surprised at how much I can accomplish in a library.

5. All the usual reasons to love libraries

Libraries promote literacy, equity of access (generally free access) and intellectual freedom. They are refuges for people who live the life of the mind, gateways for those in search of knowledge and public spaces vital to healthy communities. The internet and home computers allow each of us to work and play in our own little boxes, not too differently from televisions, video games and private book collections. Libraries celebrate the spirit of coming together to share in the pursuit of knowledge.

So by all means, let's scan away, but let's not lose sight of why we built libraries in the first place. The future looks as bright as a computer monitor, but a failure to preserve our libraries would be a foolish waste of our intellectual heritage.

Note: Portions of this article first appeared as a blog post on *Publick Occurrences 2.0*, part of *Common-place: The Interactive Journal of Early American Life*.

Tags: Benjamin Carp, Electronic databases, Librarianship, Libraries, Tufts University