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Library Personality Report
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John Cotton Dana (1856-1929)

John Cotton Dana is best known for using public relations and marketing tactics to make libraries fundamental parts of their communities and as being an integral part in the formation of the Special Libraries Association.

Dana worked a variety of jobs after his 1878 Dartmouth graduation. He practiced law, edited a local newspaper, sold real estate, worked as a civil engineer, surveyed land and worked as a construction superintendent. A newspaper article written by Dana about the quality of public education persuaded the superintendent of Denver's school board to appoint Dana the first librarian of the Denver School District in 1889. It later became the Denver Public Library.

Although Dana had no formal library education, he was a pioneer in the fields of library marketing and public relations. He shared the attitude of many of the progressive thinkers at the turn of the century and strived to make the public library a place for the community to gather and where all would feel welcome. In his opinion the 19th century library was nothing more than a storehouse of books being protected by librarians, and he wanted to make the new, progressive 20th century library open to all and a social force in the community.

At the Denver Public Library, there was a circulation of 6,000 volumes in the first six months Dana was there—the library only had 2,000 volumes in its entire collection. He established a medical collection with the Colorado Medical Association, and it later became the Denver Medical Library. He also created a separate children's department—the first in the country—that had appropriate children's furniture and art.

Dana left Denver to work at the City Library of Springfield, Massachusetts in 1898. Because Springfield was a bigger system, Dana felt he could accomplish more there. He used many of the tactics that he used in Denver to make the library more central to the community. He also established the David Ames Wells Economic Library. Four years after Dana's arrival, circulation had increased 45 percent. Dana resigned from his post and became librarian of the Free Public Library of Newark, New Jersey in 1902.

It was in Newark that Dana most left his mark on the field of librarianship. While administrator, the number of books available rose from 79,000 to 392,000; the number of users increased from 19,000 to 75,000; and the yearly circulation improved from 314,000 to almost 2,000,000. Dana employed intense publicity tactics and transformed the management and policy of the library to reach these numbers. He also established the Newark Business Library in the town's business district and founded the Newark Museum Association, which had close ties to the library.

Dana was president of the American Library Association in 1896. He helped to create the Special Libraries Association shortly after the business library was established in Newark; he was the association's first president.

Almost 20 years after his death, the American Library Association inaugurated the John Cotton Dana Award as the award given to libraries that have set themselves apart from others by their public education and public relations work. It is a highly sought after award.

Bibliography

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