

A Brief History of the American Philatelic Research Library

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The [American Philatelic Research Library \(APRL\)](#) is the largest library of its kind in North America, and perhaps the world. It specializes in stamp collecting and postal history, and has a print collection of 90,000 volumes. Although it primarily serves the 27,000 members of the American Philatelic Society (APS), with which it is co-located in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, it is an independent public library and provides services to researchers and other libraries around the world.

The APRL was founded in 1968, but its history reaches back much further. When the APS was founded as a national organization for the new and growing hobby of philately in 1886, it included a library department and a volunteer librarian. The collection, consisting of donations from members and publishers, was circulated by mail and had to be moved when a new librarian was appointed. At the time, the APS had no central office. Although philatelists have been reading and writing about their hobby almost since its inception – postage stamps were first produced in the 1840s and by the 1860s philatelic literature was already substantial enough to encourage bibliographies – the cumbersome operation of the correspondence library resulted in insufficient use and the collection was transferred to the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. It was cataloged in [Books on Philately in the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh](#) (Pittsburgh: American Philatelic Association, 1901) and APS members in the Pittsburgh area attempted to make the collection available to members in other parts of the country through the mail, but in 1927 the APS abandoned the library altogether.

After the closure of the APS library, American philatelists relied on their personal book collections or regional libraries, such as those maintained by the Collectors Club in New York City and the Chicago Collectors Club, for the next few decades. Meanwhile, the APS grew and began to centralize its operations. In 1947, the APS hired its first employee, H. Clay Musser, and established its first office in State College, Pennsylvania, where Musser lived. The town of State College, located in central Pennsylvania, several hours' drive from a major metropolitan area,



The main reading room of the American Philatelic Research Library. Photo by Pieper O'Brien Herr Architects.

had grown up around the Pennsylvania State University (established in 1855). In 1958, the APS Sales Division moved its operations from Dallas, Texas to State College.

In the 1960s, the idea of a national library for stamp collecting gained momentum once again, and in 1968 the APRL was founded as an affiliate of the APS. It opened for business in 1972 with the completion of the American Philatelic Building in State College, Pennsylvania to house the APS and APRL. Like the original APS library, the APRL relied primarily on donations to build its collection. Two substantial transfers comprised the bulk of the initial collection: the Boston University Libraries philatelic collection and the personal collection of Daniel Vooyo, then president of the APS. Within a decade the APS and the APRL's growing collection needed more space, and a new American Philatelic Building was built on the outskirts of State College and opened in 1982.

The APRL served researchers who could come to State College in person, but, like the original APS library, provided most services, including book loans, by mail. With the growth of the internet in the 1990s, services were expanded to include reference and document delivery by email, and later, a growing digital library.

By the beginning of the 21st century, the APS and APRL again found themselves in need of new space. In 2002, the APRL purchased an abandoned factory complex in nearby Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, and began renovations for the new home of the APS and APRL. The two organizations moved into the Match Factory in 2004. For the next 12 years, the APRL occupied a temporary 12,500-sq. ft. library space, with some collections housed in an unrenovated warehouse space in a different part of the complex. Renovation of the permanent 19,000-sq. ft. library space in the Match Factory was completed in phases, and the current APRL facility opened in 2016, with a grand opening that attracted philatelists from around the country as far away as England. The Match Factory complex is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and the library design (by Pieper O'Brien Herr Architects, Charles O'Brien, principal architect) highlights architectural elements of the factory building.

More details of the new library and the renovation project are shared in the forthcoming book chapter "Building Community Through History: The Reuse of an Old Factory for the American Philatelic Research Library" (in Petra Hauke and Robert Niess (eds.), *New Libraries in Old Buildings*).