

Hit the BOOKS



Photo by Megan Manton/Boston Athenaeum

Amid the stacks: The Boston Athenaeum has been open since 1849. The library's Special Collections are world-renowned and include portions of George Washington's personal library.

Cambridge and Boston libraries are stacked with things to experience and see—and not just for the literary minded

By Jenna Schnuer for USA TODAY

Boston and Cambridge are awash in books. After all, more than 50 colleges and universities pepper the map of Boston and its surroundings. But some of the jewels of the area's book-bound community are its libraries.

They're, of course, stocked with tomes perfect for keeping you entertained on a too-cold day (or, really, any day), but most are works of art in their own right and many offer up exhibits worth exploring. And libraries get bonus points: Their exhibits, tours, and other services are usually offered free of charge. Just don't walk by the donation boxes you'll see here and there too quickly. If you want to see more exhibits on your next visit, drop a buck or two through the slot.

BOSTON ATHENAEUM

Before there was the Boston Public Library, there was the Boston Athenaeum. A membership library, the athenaeum opened in 1807 and has welcomed readers and researchers ever since. The library moved into its current home in 1849. Though the general public can wander the first floor and exhibition halls any time the library is open, wait until Tuesdays or Thursdays at 3 p.m. if you can. That's when a docent takes nonmembers to see the art and architecture that members get to enjoy the rest of the week. Reservations are required: 617-227-0270, ext. 279.

But even if you can't make a tour, there's plenty to explore. The library hosts some wonderful exhibits. On view through March 3, Artists' Books gives visitors the chance to see several works from the library's permanent collection, including ones by Xu

Bing, Stephen Dupont, and Harriet Bart.
>> 10½ Beacon St., Boston; 617-227-0270; bostonathenaeum.org

CAMBRIDGE PUBLIC LIBRARY, MAIN LIBRARY

It would be understandable if you visited this architectural wonder just for a look-see at its stunning exterior. As you approach, you'll see the original building from 1887, listed on the National Historic Register, and its very modern addition from 2009. The renovated (and green-certified) building, which won the Boston Society of Architects' 2010 Harleston Parker Medal for "single most beautiful building" of the last decade, gained nearly 77,000 square feet of space.

Get to know the backstory of both the old and new parts of the building with a free tour. The docent-led tours run every



Bob Coe/Cambridge Public Library

Past meets present: The original building of the Cambridge Public Library is on the National Historic Register.

By the numbers

12,000

Number of books—dating from the 15th to the 20th centuries—at the former home of Henry W. Longfellow

Saturday at 10 a.m. Reserve a spot by sending an email to cpldocents@gmail.com. The library also hosts numerous events each week, especially for the wee library lovers in your life. Library events are listed on the library website.

GO DEEPER: History buffs, scholars, family history hunters, and even just the mildly curious should stop into the library's Cambridge Room. It's, without a doubt, the best public resource on all things Cambridge. Inside are maps, photos, and old city records. Main library second floor; open Monday, 1 to 5 p.m., Tuesday and Thursday, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., Wednesday, 5 to 9 p.m., and closed Friday-Sunday. Keep in touch with local history on the Cambridge Room's blog: thecambridgeroom.wordpress.com.

AND EVEN DEEPER: Explore local artist Ellen Driscoll's wondrous work, *Filament/Firmament* in the library's stone building. Driscoll used glass, zinc panels, and textiles in her piece honoring Cambridge's women. Before you go, wander the Cambridge Women's Heritage Project website to find out some of the women's stories:

cambridgema.gov/Historic/CWHP/.
>> 449 Broadway; Cambridge; 617-349-4040; cambridgema.gov/cpl.aspx

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY, CENTRAL LIBRARY

The Boston Public Library says that it was the first large, free municipal library in the United States. Opened in 1854, the Central Library moved into what is now known as the McKim building—named for architect Charles Follen McKim—in 1895. In 1986, the building became a National Historic Landmark. Its other half, which houses the library's circulating collection, was designed by Philip Johnson and opened in 1972.

Though the public is welcome to come to Copley Square to wander the library's rooms and hallways—don't miss a chance to gaze up at the 50-foot-high ceiling of Bates Hall or to just sit for a spell in the elegance and



Photo from Boston Public Library

city is home to an ever-expanding cast of interesting characters (and poet laureates and scientists), the offerings are incredibly varied.

AND EVEN DEEPER: With more than 650,000 photos and 100,000 prints and drawings, the library's Print Department could keep a visitor busy for a long time. Start by exploring local photo history with the Boston Pictorial Archive. The department is open to the public by appointment only.
>> 700 Boylston St.; Boston; 617-536-5400; bpl.org/central

HARVARD UNIVERSITY'S HOUGHTON LIBRARY

While Harvard's libraries aren't open for public use, you can tour the one housing most of the university's collection of rare books and manuscripts. Meet in Houghton Library's lobby on Fridays at 2 p.m. for a tour of several rooms dedicated to famous

quiet of the courtyard next to the main staircase—the best way to get anchored in all the library building has to offer is on a free art and architecture tour. Tours are offered once daily, and no reservation is required: Monday 2:30 p.m., Tuesday 6 p.m., Wednesday 11 a.m., Thursday 6 p.m., Friday and Saturday 11 a.m., and Sunday 2 p.m. (November-May). Or put your smartphone to work and pull up the library's self-guided tour of the McKim building: bpl.org/central/walkmckim.htm.

GO DEEPER: Though the city's museums and universities offer an enticing array of events, lectures, and other goodies, the library's event calendar should be your first stop on a web tour of "what are we going to do tonight?" Because the



A BOOKISH SPOT FOR A SLEEPOVER

Extend your day's library theme with a stay in the Hotel Commonwealth's new Reading Suite. Though the hotel's beds get high marks, there's a good chance you'll end up snoozing in one of the oversized leather chairs while reading one of the many signed books by authors who have called the hotel home for a night or two. Don't miss the letters signed by Raymond Chandler and Arthur Conan Doyle.

>> 500 Commonwealth Ave.; Boston; 617-933-5000; hotelcommonwealth.com

names: Emily Dickinson, Amy Lowell, and John Keats. Library holdings include 300 of Dickinson's letters and her writing table.
>> Harvard Yard at Harvard University; Cambridge; 617-495-2443; hcl.harvard.edu/libraries/houghton

PAPERCUT ZINE LIBRARY AT LOREM IPSUM BOOKS

One of the city's small niche libraries, the Papercut Zine Library is a giant nod to the youth culture that drives much of Cambridge. Housed inside a bookstore—and a dandy bookstore at that—the lending library offers visitors a chance to browse or borrow from the collection of 14,000 zines. (Yes, zine production by individuals and small presses is alive and well and thriving once more.) Anybody can become a member.

The library's regular hours are Saturday-Monday, 2 to 7 p.m., unless you make an appointment via the online contact form.

Like what you see? Want to spend more time there? The library is looking for volunteers.

>> 1299 Cambridge St.; Cambridge; papercutzinelibrary.org