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## **20 Things to Know: Where to Explore Rare Books and Library Culture in Greater Philadelphia**

**PHILADELPHIA, December 3, 2025** – Trinity Memorial Church in Rittenhouse Square will host the [Philadelphia Rare Book Fair](#) on Thursday, Dec. 4, marking the perfect time to reflect and review the city’s proud literary history and library culture.

Bookworms and bibliophiles have special reason to boast since Philadelphia lays claim to the nation’s first public-lending library: The Library Company, founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1731. This literary milestone gave everyday citizens shared access to rare books owned by Franklin and his inner “Junto” circle, allowing people of all ranks to debate the issues of the day with vigor and knowledge.

Today, there are many ways to celebrate storytelling in Philadelphia and the Countryside, including Bucks, Montgomery, Chester and Delaware counties. From a cozy family-run barn selling rare first editions to a centuries-old brownstone housing original Charles Dickens’ manuscripts – along with the only museum in America dedicated to Black literature – books are cool *again*.

So, grab your favorite bookmark as we dive into Philly’s rare book and library culture:

### **[Baldwin’s Book Barn](#)**

**865 Lenape Road, West Chester, PA**

First established as an independent bookstore in 1946, The Barn offers a true slice of nostalgia and suburban charm in a five-story building that was built in 1822. Today, Thomas Baldwin runs this cozy nook in West Chester where his family has been offering used, rare and fine books since World War II. The bookstore — named one of the “[World’s Most Beloved Independent Bookstores](#)” by *Architectural Digest* — features a wood-burning fireplace and more than 300,000 titles crammed into every corner and hideaway. *Open to the public; Monday-Sunday, 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m.*

### **[Bauman Rare Books](#)**

**1608 Walnut Street, Suite 1000, Philadelphia, PA**

First opened in 1973, Bauman has three locations across the country, including this cozy research office in Philadelphia. Make no mistake, this place is for serious book collectors and wealthy antiquarians. Inside, you’ll be privy to rare first editions: *Atlas Shrugged* – inscribed by author Ayn Rand in 1957 – and an “extraordinarily rare” first issue of the *Journal of the Proceedings of the Congress*, notes from the First

Continental Congress held on Sept. 5, 1774, at Carpenters' Hall. *Open to the public (by appointment only), Monday-Friday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m.*

### **Black Writers Museum**

**5800 Germantown Avenue, Philadelphia, PA**

The only U.S. museum that focuses exclusively on Black literature by classic and contemporary writers occupies the historic Vernon House in Germantown. Here, visitors find hundreds of significant items: rare newspapers, manuscripts, recordings, photographs and first editions. The museum's Ida B. Wells Library contains more than one thousand books, including titles by Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Michael Crowder, Sapphire and Jacob H. Carruthers. *Open to the public; Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, 11 a.m.-6 p.m.; Saturday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m.*

### **Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection at Temple**

**1330 Pollet Walk, Philadelphia, PA – Temple University**

This collection is one of the nation's leading research facilities for the study of the history and culture of people of African descent. The compilation of over 700,000 items includes contemporary and rare publications, prints, photographs, manuscripts and letters, including first editions by Phyllis Wheatley, W.E.B. Du Bois, George Washington Williams and others. *Open to the public; Monday-Friday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. (appointments recommended).*

### **Fisher Fine Arts Library at Penn**

**220 South 34th Street, Philadelphia, PA – University of Pennsylvania**

Designed by renowned architect Frank Furness, Fisher Fine Arts – a Venetian Gothic-style building, adorned in red sandstone – was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1985. Inside, visitors can see impressive collections devoted to architecture and material samples, as well as the Perkins Rare Books Library. Insider's tip: grab a seat in the Rotunda Reading Room. *Open to the public; Monday-Friday, 9 a.m.-6 p.m. (valid photo ID required).*

### **Free Library of Philadelphia, Parkway Central Branch**

**1901 Vine Street, Philadelphia, PA**

A stunning Beaux Arts building along the culture-packed Benjamin Franklin Parkway serves as the flagship of a citywide organization that includes 61 neighborhood libraries, a research center and community centers. Visitors here can explore a massive collection of rare works. Insider tip: Charles Dickens' taxidermied pet bird, Grip, thought to be Edgar Allan Poe's inspiration for *The Raven*, resides upon a pedestal in the Rare Book Department. *Open to the public; Monday-Friday, 9 a.m.-8 p.m. (you will need a library card to borrow books).*

### **Historical Society of Pennsylvania**

**1300 Locust Street, Philadelphia, PA**

This century-old brick building, listed on the City of Philadelphia's Register of Historical Places, is home to 600,000 books and 21 million manuscript items. The collection, popular among academics and researchers, covers topics from more than 350 years of U.S. history, and occasional evening programs feature notable speakers, including historians, authors and archeologists. *Open to the public; Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.; Wednesday, 1 p.m.-7 p.m.*

### **[Kislak Center at Penn](#)**

**3420 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA – University of Pennsylvania**

Nestled on the sixth floor of the Van Pelt-Dietrich Library at Penn, this massive space boasts 300,000 printed books and 14,000 linear feet of modern manuscripts. Their collection spans the ancient world and contemporary era, with their oldest book – the 48th volume of *Daihannya haramitta-kyō* – dating back to Japan in 1410. Insider tip: ask to see a pair of worn-in leather gloves that may have belonged to William Shakespeare. *Open to the public; Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m. (visitors must show a valid ID).*

### **[Mutter Museum](#)**

**19 South 22nd Street, Philadelphia, PA**

Tourists flock to this macabre museum mostly to see medical oddities, but that's not all. The Mutter contains a plethora of medical charts and lecture notes from famous doctors, including nearly 400 *medical incunabula* – early published books on medicine printed prior to 1501. Their [Historical Medical Library](#) can be searched online or by appointment. *Open to the public; Wednesday-Monday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.*

### **[Special Collections Research Center at Temple](#)**

**1900 North 13th Street, Philadelphia, PA – Temple University**

Located on the first floor of the Charles Library on Temple's main campus in North Philadelphia, the SCRC is the principal repository for and steward of all the university's rare books, manuscripts and archives. Their expansive catalog features 125,000 books and periodicals, browsable and searchable (digitally), including documents from Sir William Osler, Dr. Temple Fay and others. *Open to the public; Monday-Friday, 8:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. (registration required for first-time visitors).*

### **[The Athenaeum of Philadelphia](#)**

**219 South 6th Street, Philadelphia, PA**

The Athenaeum was founded as a member-supported library in 1814 and continued for more than a century and a half as a British-style reading room on one of the city's original squares. During the last quarter century, the Athenaeum built its collections, restored its building and transformed itself into a national center for the history of architecture and design. *Open to the public; Monday, 9 a.m.-7 p.m.; Tuesday-Friday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m.-3 p.m.*

### **[The Library Company of Philadelphia](#)**

**1314 Locust Street, Philadelphia, PA**

Founded by Ben Franklin in 1731, this independent research library focusing on 17th to 19th-century American society and culture is said to be the country's oldest cultural institution. The Scheide Reading Room allows people access to a rare collection of books, photography, manuscripts and art. The library also owns one of the nation's largest collections of pre-1801 American imprints. *Open to the public, Monday-Friday, 9 a.m.-12:15 p.m. and 1:30 p.m.-4:45 p.m. (advance registration required).*

### **[The Rosenbach Museum & Library](#)**

**2008-2010 Delancey Street, Philadelphia, PA**

Some of the world's greatest literary treasures are on view at this 1860s brownstone holding the personal collection of the Rosenbach brothers, 19th-century dealers in fine art, rare books and manuscripts. A best-known feature is James Joyce's manuscript for *Ulysses*, but equally impressive are more than 600 Lewis Carroll books, Shakespeare's 1664 folio and playbills from 18th-century performances, plus portions of Charles Dickens' manuscripts as well as notes and outlines for *Dracula* by Bram Stoker. *Open to the public; Thursday-Saturday, 10:30 a.m.-6 p.m.; Sunday, 10:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m.*

### **Did You Know?**

- Thomas Paine's "[Common Sense](#)" – a pamphlet laying out a clear and concise argument for American independence – was first published on Jan. 10, 1776, at Robert Bell's printing press on South Third Street; today, a [historical marker](#) stands there in tribute.
- [Sarah Josepha Hale](#), author of "Mary Had a Little Lamb," was the first female magazine editor in the United States. In 1828, a widowed Hale worked for *The Ladies' Magazine* (later: *Godey's Lady Book*). Today, a historical marker stands at 922 Spruce Street; she is buried in Laurel Hill Cemetery.
- [Charles Brockden Brown](#), a Philly novelist who spurned his law studies in 1793 to embark on a literary career. Called the "Father of the American Novel," his writing style popularized the Gothic genre, thanks to books like "Wieland" and "Edgar Huntly." Brockden Brown influenced Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Today, a [historical marker](#) stands at 207 Chestnut Street; he is buried in an unmarked grave at Arch Street Meeting House.
- [Frances Ellen Watkins Harper](#), upon moving from Baltimore to Philadelphia in 1853, used her mighty pen to power the abolitionist movement. She was an accomplished writer, journalist, poet, suffragist and activist who has been labeled the "Mother of African-American Journalism." Her work, entitled "Two Offers," was the first short story published by a Black woman in America. A [historical marker](#) stands at 1006 Bainbridge Street, her home from 1871 until 1911.
- [Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson](#), an American poet and writer from Horsham, organized the country's first literary gatherings called "Attic Evenings" out of her Philadelphia home. These intimate gatherings were inspired by the salons of England and attracted the most influential statesmen, writers and musicians of the 18th century. She is buried at [Christ Church Burial Ground](#) in Old City.

– [Edgar Allan Poe](#), the master of the macabre, lived at 532 North 7th Street in Philadelphia from 1843 to 1844. Here, Poe penned some of his most famous works, including “The Black Cat,” which describes a basement eerily similar to the one in this house. The three-story brick building, guarded by a towering “Raven” statue, was designated a [National Historic Landmark](#) in 1962. (This historic site is undergoing a renovation project and closed to the public, with plans to reopen in 2026.)

– [Walt Whitman](#), often called America’s greatest poet, lived and wrote across the Delaware River (330 Mickle Boulevard) in Camden, New Jersey, from 1873 until his death in 1892. This is where Whitman put the finishing touches on two of his greatest works: *Leaves of Grass* and *Specimen Days*. There is a suspension bridge named in his honor, connecting Philadelphia to Camden.

### **About Visit Philadelphia:**

VISIT PHILADELPHIA® is our name and our mission. As the region’s official tourism marketing agency, we build Greater Philadelphia’s image, drive visitation and boost the economy. On Greater Philadelphia’s official visitor website, [visitphilly.com](http://visitphilly.com), visitors can explore things to do, upcoming events, themed itineraries and hotel packages.

Compelling photography and videos, interactive maps and detailed visitor information make the site an effective trip-planning tool. Visitors can also find loads of inspiration on Visit Philly’s social media Channels.

*Note to Editors: For high-resolution photos and high-definition B-roll of Greater Philadelphia, visit the Photos & Video section of [visitphilly.com/mediacenter](http://visitphilly.com/mediacenter).*