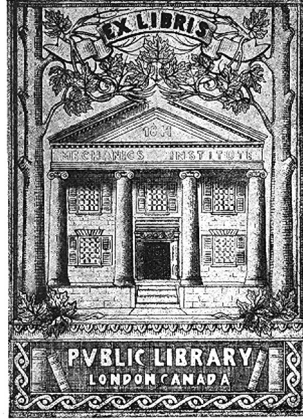


## Founding Institutes

THE BOOKPLATE OF Ontario's London Public Library presents the image of a library as a bucolic retreat into a house of learning. The grand, four-columned building would be imposing but for the fact that it is dwarfed by two maple trees on either side. The doors are open, inviting the reader to step inside and peruse the shelves. "1841 Mechanics Institute" is written on the building's façade. A banner above labels the print as an *ex libris*, and a separate compartment below the building displays several books and the originating institution's name.



Mechanics' institutes emerged in Scotland in the early 1820s, conceived as collaborative, voluntary associations of men seeking to further their education. They arose out of the Industrial Revolution, which introduced new machines into the workplace. These machines needed to be built, maintained and repaired, giving rise to a new type of worker: the mechanic.

In truth, these men were closer to mechanical engineers. Mechanics' institutes typically offered reading rooms, lending libraries, lectures, performances and exhibitions. In many ways, they were the precursor to the modern public library. In the 20th century, as their institutional popularity declined, however, many mechanics' institutes were closed or integrated into the public library system.

The London Mechanics Institute opened in 1835 in Court House Square. It was the third such institution to be opened in Upper Canada, after Toronto and Kingston. The building contained art studios that were used by London Art School students. The space was also reportedly used for grammar school classes in the early 1850s.

By 1855, the institute had moved to Talbot Street, and the Talbot Street building is probably the one depicted in the bookplate. The original

location subsequently became known as the "old Mechanics Institute." It was used for a time to hold Presbyterian services, until St. James Presbyterian Church opened its doors in 1861.

In 1877, a new building was erected at 231 Dundas Street when the institute outgrew its second home. The 1883 Ontario Free Public Libraries Act enabled the larger mechanics' institutes to become public libraries. In 1895, amendments to the legisla-

tion allowed chartered institutes to change their official names to "Public Library," which the institute in London chose to do. Its collection was the seed of London's public library collection.

Although the date of this *ex libris* is unknown, because it cites both the Mechanics Institute and the Public Library, it was very likely produced in the late 1800s or early 1900s, during the period of transition to the public library system. The bookplate pays homage to the varied activities supported by the London Mechanics Institute and links it to the contemporary London Public Library. Libraries are the new mechanics' institutes—with all the associated opportunities for reading, learning, teaching, art, and community endeavours.

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The Rare Books and Special Collections Bookplate Collection can be accessed from the UBC Library Digital Collections and Services site, <http://digitalcollections.library.ubc.ca>.