

Montana State Library Commission

Statement on the Freedom to Read

June 13, 2022

Excerpt of letter from Thomas Jefferson to Charles Yancey

If a nation expects to be ignorant & free, in a state of civilisation, it expects what never was & never will be. The functionaries of every government have propensities to command at will the liberty & property of their constituents. There is no safe deposit for these but with the people themselves; nor can they be safe with them without information. Where the press is free and every man able to read, all is safe.¹

The principle that access to information will ensure freedom informed the drafting of the First Amendment of the US Constitution. The opportunity to read and inform one's opinions, to engage in open discourse, and to express differing ideas are fundamental rights of Americans and are core aspects of our national character. Public libraries stand as institutions that foster information sharing, discourse, and the free expression of ideas. Banning, removing, or censoring materials, speakers, or displays without due process violates Americans' Constitutional rights.

The Montana State Library Commission maintains and operates the State Library and gives assistance and advice to all tax-supported or public libraries. The Montana State Library Commission stands in firm support of the freedom to read and speak as inalienable rights protected by the First Amendment. We are committed to defending those rights for all Montanans and, through our consulting services, support the selection of library materials that represent a broad range of topics and ideas to meet the information needs of all members of Montana communities. We affirm the roles of library professionals to follow established collection development policies and professional standards as they develop collections and programs that reflect and support the communities they serve. Libraries have procedures in place for reevaluating those selections if library users voice concerns about materials or services that they find objectionable.

We recognize that not every book is right for every reader, however, no one person or group has the authority to determine what is appropriate for someone else. To submit to anything less is contrary to the freedoms afforded through access to information.

The Montana State Library Commission's affirmation of the freedom to read is inherent to the Commission's resolution that all Montanans will have access to library content and services, sufficient unto their needs.

¹ "Thomas Jefferson to Charles Yancey, 6 January 1816," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-09-02-0209>. [Original source: *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Retirement Series, vol. 9, *September 1815 to April 1816*, ed. J. Jefferson Looney. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012, pp. 328–331.]