System Dreams: Public Libraries and the Politics of Regional Library Service in Allegheny County, 1935-1989

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1. Abstract

This narrative contributes to local library history and political theory by tracing how visions of scale were circulated and contested in 20th-century Pittsburgh prior to county amalgamation.

2. Introduction

Regional library infrastructure is a contentious issue in Pittsburgh. The purpose of this poster is therefore to sketch out a political history of this system's development.
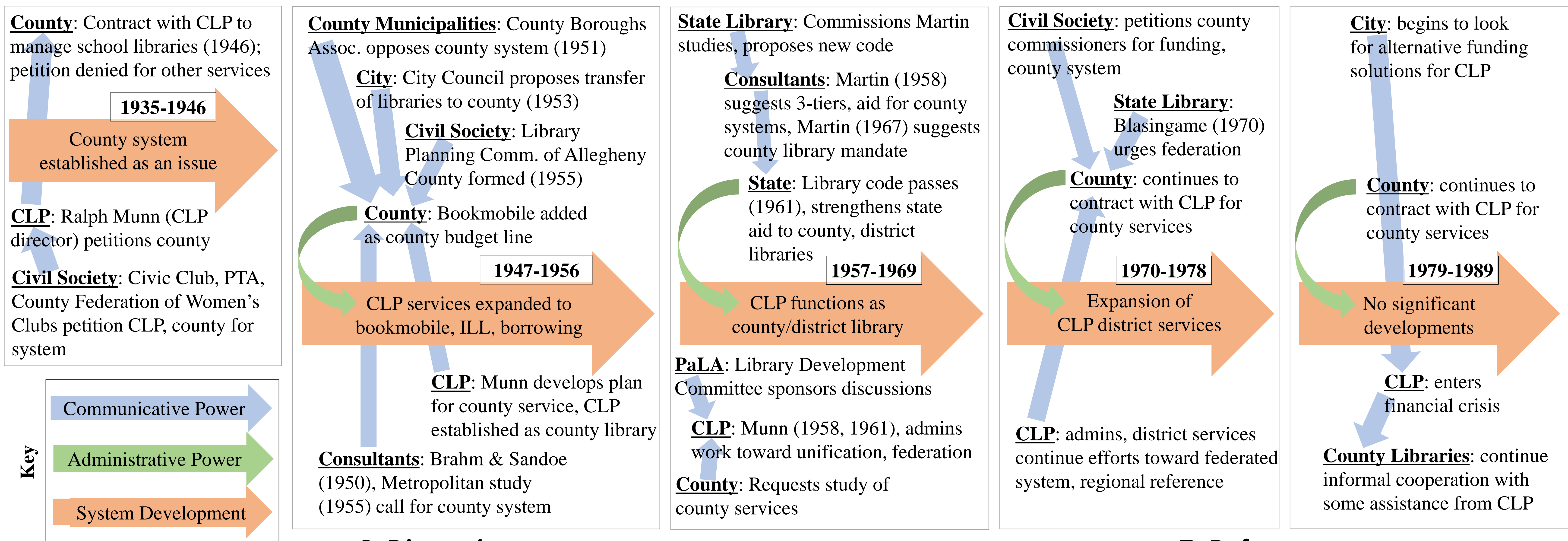
3. Research Problem and Question

Population, economics, and literacy are necessary but insufficient historical causes for library development. Civil society movements, public sphere activity, communicative processes, and legal power also explain infrastructural evolution. What is the political history of library infrastructure in Pittsburgh?

4. Methodology

Data was gathered at Heinz History Center Detre Library and Archives, Oliver Special Collections Room at Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh (CLP), and the University of Pittsburgh Archives Service Center. Data was analyzed according to a theory developed by Habermas (1996) and tailored to local conditions. In this model, *communicative power* flows to legislative bodies where it is transformed into *administrative power* through law, leading to developments in social services

5. Results

County: Contract with CLP to manage school libraries (1946); petition denied for other services

1935-1946

County system established as an issue

CLP: Ralph Munn (CLP director) petitions county

Civil Society: Civic Club, PTA, County Federation of Women's Clubs petition CLP, county for system

Key

- Communicative Power
- Administrative Power
- System Development

County Municipalities: County Boroughs Assoc. opposes county system (1951)

City: City Council proposes transfer of libraries to county (1953)

Civil Society: Library Planning Comm. of Allegheny County formed (1955)

County: Bookmobile added as county budget line

1947-1956

CLP services expanded to bookmobile, ILL, borrowing

CLP: Munn develops plan for county service, CLP established as county library

Consultants: Brahm & Sandoe (1950), Metropolitan study (1955) call for county system

State Library: Commissions Martin studies, proposes new code

Consultants: Martin (1958) suggests 3-tiers, aid for county systems, Martin (1967) suggests county library mandate

State: Library code passes (1961), strengthens state aid to county, district libraries

1957-1969

CLP functions as county/district library

PaLA: Library Development Committee sponsors discussions

CLP: Munn (1958, 1961), admins work toward unification, federation

County: Requests study of county services

Civil Society: petitions county commissioners for funding, county system

State Library: Blasingame (1970) urges federation

County: continues to contract with CLP for county services

1970-1978

Expansion of CLP district services

CLP: admins, district services continue efforts toward federated system, regional reference

City: begins to look for alternative funding solutions for CLP

County: continues to contract with CLP for county services

1979-1989

No significant developments

CLP: enters financial crisis

County Libraries: continue informal cooperation with some assistance from CLP

6. Discussion

- Communicative power and administrative power circulated through a variety of pathways to affect regional infrastructure development
- Infrastructure solutions balanced interests of home rule (autonomy), efficiency, and cooperation
- Communicative power was translated into administrative power at the county and state levels to change or maintain the county system
- System evolution resulted from tax legislation and budget changes at county and state levels

7. References

Blasingame, R., DeProspo, E. R., & Goldberg, R. L. (1970). *Organization for public library services in an urban field: Plan for establishment of a county public library service system for Allegheny County, Pennsylvania.*

Habermas, J. (1996). *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy* (W. Rehg, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

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