The library was founded in 1875 as library of the "Deutsche Seewarte" (German Naval Observatory) in Hamburg. The aim of the Deutsche Seewarte was to improve the safety of marine navigation by the knowledge of the natural conditions of the oceans. Meteorological and oceanographic observations were made and ships were assisted in finding the shortest and best routes for their voyages.

Georg von Neumayer, first director of the Seewarte, used all his influence to enter into connections with related institutions. He was very interested in enlarging the stocks of the library and took up every opportunity to ask for publications. So, since the inception of the library, an international exchange of publications has been developed. Moreover, the library received valuable books and reports as gifts and naturally by purchase. Most of the stocks of those years is still on our shelves:

- old meteorological literature
- continuous weather observations from all parts of the world
- magnetic observations
- old dissertations and reprints in the fields of meteorology, physics and related fields
- oceanographic literature
- reports of nearly all important oceanographic expeditions of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century
- the sailing directions of Wilhelm von Freeden
- the famous sailing handbooks (pilots) of the Deutsche Seewarte
- some rare sea atlases and ship journals from the 17th and 18th century
- ship registers
- books about ship constructions and navigation
- the original documents of the Polar Expeditions 1882/83 (on microfiche now)
- and lastly a collection of drift bottle formulas, which were returned to the Seewarte by finders (the bottles had been released
into the sea in order to get information on ocean currents)

By 1939 the library contained 53,000 volumes. During World War II the library holdings were distributed to different places. The Deutsche Seewarte was destroyed by bombs in 1944. Nearly 13,000 volumes were lost during the war. In 1945 the Deutsche Seewarte was disbanded.

The "Deutsches Hydrographisches Institut" (German Hydrographic Institute) and the "Seewetteramt" (Marine Meteorological Office), a part of the German Weather Service, were founded in Hamburg, and tasks of the former Seewarte were delegated to these institutions.

In 1951 the library was established in the new building on the Bernhard Nocht Straße, near the old place of the Seewarte on the river Elbe. In 1990 the name was changed to Bundesamt für Seeschifffahrt und Hydrographie (BSH) (Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency). The library is now part of the BSH, but also serves the Marine Meteorological Office. After the German unification in 1990 the BSH established a branch office in Rostock with a library of about 6,000 volumes. Today the BSH library is the central maritime library of the Federal Republic of Germany.

The currently contains about 130,000 volumes and 40,000 nautical charts. The annual accessions are between 2,500 and 3,000 volumes. We cooperate with 1,000 exchange partners worldwide. Our main topics are: oceanography (except marine biology), marine pollution, marine chemistry, marine geophysics, meteorology, geo-magnetism, hydrographic surveying, nautical cartography, shipping, and navigation. The "Archive" of the library includes all nautical charts and books the BSH and the successor institutes have ever published.

The library may be used by all persons and libraries. Books and journals can be lent (except books from the historical stocks), but there is no access to the book shelves for the users.

There are different catalogues for literature retrieval. Since 1961 a documentation catalogue of journal articles exists. It's possible to use a self-made database for searching these articles. Additional literature retrieval in ASFA CD-ROM and in external databases is possible.

Since April 1992 a special software for libraries has been installed, and in the near future the library will begin online cataloguing. At present the library of the BSH prepares a union list of periodicals for all libraries of the Working Group (AMB).