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NEW YORK'S OLDEST PUBLIC LIBRARIES

IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, before the proliferation of tax-supported libraries in the United States, the subscription library filled the reading needs of many people in the country. Now little known outside a small group of library historians and current members of these institutions, many subscription libraries flourished in the 1800s, but by the twentieth century most had disappeared, victims of lack of funds, lack of interest, or mismanagement.

Called membership libraries today, only sixteen subscription libraries are left in the United States. They continue to provide services and care for historic collections, filling a need in various cultural and social strata in several American cities. Some, such as the tiny Salem Athenaeum, survive despite tiny budgets and constituencies; others, such as the Boston Athenaeum and the Athenaeum of Philadelphia, have impressive and important collections. Their constituencies range from the low hundreds to as many as 7,000 members.

New York City is home to three such libraries, all of which are located within a mile and a half of each other: the Library of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen and the Mercantile Library of New York, both in midtown Manhattan; and the New York Society Library, on the Gold Coast of the Upper East Side of Manhattan. The three were established by and for different social groups whose social and economic status experienced myriad changes in the nineteenth century. Their histories and current situations illustrate the principal streams of subscription library development in America.

Evolution of Libraries in the United States

The founding of the first continuously operating library in America usually is credited to Benjamin Franklin, whose Library Company of Philadelphia was established in 1731 (other libraries were founded before Franklin's, most in New England, but these no longer exist). The establishment of libraries has often been ascribed to a continued reformist response to the yoke of church control of moral and cultural education and the American embrace of self-realization and self-reliance. Americans took the precepts of the latter to heart and developed not only a thirst for democratic rule, but also a desire for the secularization of moral, ethical, and cultural teachings.

In his *Autobiography*, Franklin clearly documented his reasons for establishing a library. In the 1720s, he migrated from Boston to Philadelphia. There, in need of intellectual stimulation, he formed the Junto, an intellectual discussion group. In his memoir, he then established what he believed to be the next, natural step from the sharing of ideas: the exchange of books among like-minded individuals.

After the story of the library, Franklin launched into a complex discussion of his personal experiences with church sermons. He had spent too much time engaging in stimulating conversation with his peers and working out ideas about the measure of one's life to be able to find satisfaction in the moral teachings of the local church; thus, external impetus became incubus. Instead of following the institutional path, he decided to develop a personal, secular approach to moral judgments. Although the tone of his writing is not explicitly critical of the church, the underlying assumption is that the time had come in his life to secularize and personalize morality based on clear judgment and rational thought. What resulted was an outline for personal critical judgment of the world around the individual and a wresting of control of the individual's life from the church's system of external direction.

The juxtaposition of the development of the library and the wish for self-directed moral education reflects Franklin's belief in the exchange of ideas

among thinking men and the public library as an aid in doing so, and the library as an instrument of the secularization of culture. In such a case, the subscription library acted as a tool to be used to wrest control of moral education from sectarian interests (public education performed a similar role). Subscription libraries, especially mechanics' and mercantile libraries, with their emphasis on personal development, self-education, and personal perfectibility, were often guided by this principle.

Another aspect of the development of New York's subscription libraries is their reflection of changing sociopolitical values. In the introduction to his doctoral thesis on the three remaining subscription libraries in New York and their impact on New York cultural history in the nineteenth century, Tom Glynn wrote that the evolution of the three libraries represents "a shift from a republican to a liberal culture."¹ Liberal values, he argued, define society as a multitude of competing factions. If we accept this position, the three libraries do indeed embody multifactional liberalism. The New York Society Library was founded by prominent members of the professional and landowning classes during the colonial period and before the significance of the merchant class had been felt. Establishment of the Library of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen and the Mercantile Library Association of the City of New York in the 1820s represents the next step in the creation of "social libraries," so called because they were unconnected to learned societies or universities (they came from society at large). These social libraries defined a new sensibility in the values of New Yorkers themselves when, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the city began to supersede Boston as America's commercial center with the aid of projects such as the Erie Canal, the Croton Reservoir, and the grid street plan.

The earliest subscription libraries were often "proprietary" libraries, so called because their founders and selected others within that social group purchased shares that entitled them to voting membership in the governance of

1. Tom Glynn, unpublished manuscript.

the institutions. Proprietary libraries often failed because the number of proprietors and the sums of money the proprietors were willing to pay for the privilege of membership rarely provided enough income to sustain them. To survive, the libraries were forced to become hybrid proprietary–subscription libraries, taking on members who had no voting rights but were afforded the privilege of library use. Of the sixteen remaining libraries, some were established as proprietary libraries but later offered annual subscriptions. To this day, they retain a two-tiered system with proprietary shares continuing to change hands by inheritance and outright sale. These include the athenaeums in Boston, Philadelphia, and Portsmouth, in New Hampshire. Others, such as the Mercantile Library of New York, began as subscription libraries and remain so today. In some cases, today’s local public library began as a subscription library. In still other cases, subscription libraries, such as the Library Company of Philadelphia, ceased their long-term practice of circulating books and became solely research libraries.

The New York Society Library

The oldest library in New York is the New York Society Library, although it was preceded in the city by several other public libraries that have not survived. The name is misleading and does not refer to “high society” as the term is understood today. Instead, it was so named simply because it was a library and was founded by a society of men located in New York.

Established in 1754 by several of the most prominent men in New York, for the most part landowners and attorneys, the library was formulated as a proprietary library but soon offered annual subscriptions. The first public notice announcing the library’s formation and inviting others to join was published in the now-defunct *New York Mercury* on April 8, 1754, and then three days later in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*:

A subscription is now on Foot, and carried on with great Spirit, in order to raise Money for erecting and maintaining a publick Library in the City; and

we hear that not less than 70 Gentlemen have already subscribed Five Pounds Principal, and Ten Shillings per annum, for that Purpose. We make no doubt but a Scheme of this Nature, so well calculated for promoting Literature, will meet with due Encouragement from all who wish the Happiness of the rising Generation.²

Within a few months, the library's proprietors had elected a board of trustees consisting of twelve individuals. These included "the best that the province afforded in position, cultivation, attainments, native ability and character," according to the historian Austin Baxter Keep, author of the first major history of the New York Society Library published in 1908.³

The library flourished for about twenty years, with connections to a new and growing collection at King's College (later to become Columbia University). With the British occupation of the city during the Revolution, the collection was dispersed, many of the books stolen and sold by billeted British soldiers, contrary to their officers' orders.

At the end of the Revolution, the library's collection was in disarray. Among the prominent citizens of the city, the impetus for the library's founding was undiminished; and the families involved before the debacle regrouped to reestablish the library as a viable institution. Housed again at City Hall and later at Federal Hall, where the federal congress met after passage of the Constitution, the library extended borrowing privileges to members of the first U.S. Congress and since has often referred to itself as the first Library of Congress.⁴

By the early 1790s, however, the governors of the library had recognized that its growing collection necessitated a building of its own. Through gifts, sales of shares, and loans, the library purchased a site at the present-day 33 Nassau Street, between Liberty and Cedar, and stocked it with a collection

2. Notice, *The New-York Mercury*, 8 April 1754.

3. Austin Baxter Keep, *History of the New York Society Library* (New York: The Trustees of the New York Society Library, 1908), 145–46.

4. Conversation with Mark Piel, librarian in the New York Society Library.

numbering about three thousand volumes. The judiciousness of this decision was not apparent until much later in the nineteenth century, when New York's real estate took on the high value it has continued to hold in the present market. But for the sixty years after the library's board took on the loans, the library's payments on the loans created a precarious financial situation and did not allow the library to grow in the manner in which its governors and directors wished.

By 1813, according to its annual report of that year, the library's collection had increased to 12,500 volumes and was growing by an average of about 350 new books every year. By 1820, the collection had grown to twenty thousand volumes and would continue to grow throughout its existence until it reached about 200,000 volumes in the late twentieth century.

Moreover, in the first decades of the nineteenth century the library also had begun to receive special collections and artifacts. In 1827, Lorenzo Da Ponte, Mozart's librettist and professor of Italian at Columbia College, established the Italian Library Society at the library and placed his collection of 290 Italian-language volumes there; by 1829, the society had seventy members (including Clement C. Moore). At Da Ponte's death in 1838, the books became a permanent part of the library's collection. In 1848, Mrs. Maria Peebles of Lansingburgh donated what is now known as the Bakewell Prospect. This six-and-a-half-foot by twenty-eight-inch print, officially called *A South Prospect of y^e Flourishing City of New York in the Province of New York in America*, was published in London in 1746 by Thomas Bakewell and dedicated to "His Excellency GEORGE CLINTON Esq^r. Captain General & Governor in Chief of y^e Province of New York & Territories thereon dependent in America." Through the years, the library continued to collect art objects in addition to books, including oil paintings and prints.

In 1840, the library constructed its second freestanding building, located at Broadway, Leonard Street, and Catherine Lane. It was executed in neoclassical grandeur, fronted with five columns and described in Ruggles's *Picture of New York in 1846* as "a conspicuous and beautiful edifice, of the Ionic order,

of brown freestone.” Sixty feet wide and one hundred feet long, it included space for stores and offices and maintained a supply of periodicals “renewed by every steamship, form(ing) the perfection of every luxury.”⁵ Just after the building’s opening, subscriptions surpassed one thousand for the first time.

The development of the New York Society Library brings up a very critical element of New York’s membership libraries. First, location plays an important role in their existence. As the city grew, the New York Society Library (and subsequently, the General Society and the Mercantile Libraries) moved toward the city’s new centers. Indeed, New York’s membership libraries have moved as the city’s neighborhoods have changed, unlike many other subscription libraries around the country, some of which have inhabited the same building for two centuries. Second, included in the space for subscription libraries in New York are general rental areas that will generate income to support the library. Although the New York Society Library, now located in an affluent residential area of Manhattan, no longer rents space in its building, the Mercantile and the General Society Libraries continue to do so.

Financial circumstances forced the New York Society Library to sell its building in 1853. In 1856, it erected a building at 67 University Place (later renumbered as 109 University), within a half-mile of the Mercantile Library, which had acquired the Astor Place Opera House in 1853, and the Astor Library, a research (noncirculating) library established with funds donated by John Jacob Astor.

In general, the library was frequented by the more affluent groups of New York. In 1870, it was noted in the library’s annual report that:

This is not a library to which the laboring classes readily have access. Its locality, its constitution and its associations have tended to confine it to the wealthier portion of society. This has been the result rather of circumstances than of any deliberate intention.⁶

5. Edward Ruggles, *A Picture of New York in 1846* (New York: Homan & Ellis, 1846).

6. *Annual Report*, the New York Society Library, 1870, np.

By the 1870s, it had become apparent to the trustees that subscriptions would not support the library for the long term, so they began to solicit permanent funds. They followed the example of the Boston Athenaeum, which had enjoyed the fruits of an 1846 gift from member John Bromfield. (Today, the Bromfield Fund of the Boston Athenaeum, endowed with \$25,000, is worth more than \$4 million.) One of the first of these funds was awarded by the sons of John Cleve Green in the amount of \$50,000. This essentially established the first endowment for the library, which now consists of various funds totaling about \$25 million.

In the early part of the twentieth century, the library moved to East 79th Street, on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. The library's holdings, gathered over a period of almost 250 years, still serve a mainly local, affluent constituency, and the library remains very much a neighborhood-oriented institution. Because of the richness of its collection, it is the most important research library of New York's historic subscription libraries.

The Library of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen

By the early part of the nineteenth century, it had become obvious that libraries were needed for the working and middle classes. Master craftsmen and young merchants, recognizing this need, sought the assistance of several champions of those classes, who stepped forward to provide inspiration and assistance. This led to establishment of a public library for the working and middle classes, serving primarily as a circulating library of popular and literary fiction.

In 1820, the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen, an eleemosynary group founded in 1785 to provide mutual assistance for destitute working people, especially widows and children of workers, established a library as one of its divisions. According to historian Sidney Ditzion, the concept for the mechanics' library emerged from the success of the workingman's lecture, established in Glasgow in 1760. In fact, northern England and southern Scotland provided the basic concept for both mechanics' and mercantile libraries and even played a role

in the evolution of free public libraries in America. Industrialist Andrew Carnegie, a native of southern Scotland, cited the free library where he had spent many important hours of his youth as a prime ingredient in his success when, after making a fortune in America, he announced his grants to fund the construction of free public libraries across the United States.

To establish the mechanics' library in New York, master baker Thomas Mercein, chairman of the General Society's library committee, sought expert help in the person of William Wood, a native of Canandaigua, New York, who devoted a great deal of time and money to the establishment of institutions for the benefit of clerks and apprentices, sailors, prisoners, and literary societies, and also is credited by many with first developing and putting to practical use the plans devised by Franklin for the proliferation of lending libraries. According to Ditzion, Wood, a liberal merchant who also aided in the cause for Greek independence and on behalf of Polish immigrants to America, took his own inspiration and appropriated many of his ideas from visits to libraries in the northwest of England. He had been a dealer in glass and earthenware in Boston at the beginning of the nineteenth century and later did business in London. He founded a library for clerks in Liverpool and, upon his return to America, established in Boston the first institution of its kind in the country a few months before helping to found the Mercantile and Mechanics' Libraries in New York. Wood also later helped found similar institutions in Brooklyn, Philadelphia, Albany, and New Orleans.

The Library of the General Society was an immediate success. Of the two thousand volumes in the collection when the library opened on November 1, 1820, nearly three hundred circulated on the first day to working people who heretofore had had little access to cultural or technical books. For many years, the General Society would boast, according to its report released in February 1873, that it was the only library in the city "especially designed for the use of that portion of the community the most in need of information, and the least able to afford it, viz., the working boys and girls of New York."⁷ General working

7. *Annual Report*, General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen, 1 February 1873.

conditions in nineteenth-century New York were often poor, and the library also offered its members a significant refuge from the vicissitudes of daily toil.

Mechanics' libraries also served an educational purpose. As workplaces expanded and masters were unable to provide as much individual attention to apprentices, the mechanics' libraries offered important technical education useful in the working lives of their members. Indeed, the General Society's later incarnation included classes in the mechanical arts, whereas mercantile libraries aspired to increase their members' cultural awareness and later offered literary lectures, language courses, and intellectual stimulation for those seeking improvement in their commercial or social position.

In 1842, the directors of the General Society recognized that the library could sustain itself only by allowing readers who were not members of the society (that is, craftsmen and apprentices) to pay an annual subscription for use of the facilities and collection. This made the library a truly public institution and permitted unprecedented growth. In 1860, the library had 2,359 readers and a circulation of 47,756; by 1865, the numbers had grown to 7,282 readers and 135,840 volumes circulated, making the library one of the largest in the United States.

The Mercantile Library of New York

The third of the remaining subscription libraries to be established in New York was the Mercantile Library Association of the City of New York, now called the Mercantile Library of New York. Mercantile libraries, many of which were founded at the same time as mechanics' libraries, often had middle-class members who aspired to greater prominence in business and the community. In New York, William Wood persuaded several young merchants' clerks that they could improve themselves and their situations by investing a few hundred dollars, which would keep their employees away from taverns and billiard rooms. Meetings were held at the Tontine Coffee House on Wall Street, funds were raised from public-spirited merchants, books were purchased and contrib-

uted, and the library was opened on February 2, 1821, at 49 Fulton Street. In later years, it would reside on Cliff Street (off Fulton), at the corner of Nassau and Beekman Streets (Clinton Hall, named for the Governor of New York), at Astor Place (on the site of the old Italian Opera House, which in contemporary literary irony is occupied by a Starbucks coffeehouse), and finally at 17 East 47th Street in an eight-story building designed by the firm of Henry Otis Chapman, situated in the heart of midtown Manhattan. Funding for the first building was raised by the Clinton Hall Association, a newly formed group of older merchants who, desiring to help their younger confreres, sold shares to raise construction funds; subsequent buildings were financed by the sale of the previous one. The Clinton Hall Association had been established in 1828 with the vague purpose of furthering public cultural institutions in New York. At first, it approached the New York Society Library with an offer for assistance but was rebuffed by the library's board. Finally, in 1830, it signed an agreement with the fledgling Mercantile Library Association to sell proprietors' shares in order to erect a building for the library. To this day, the Clinton Hall Association owns the Mercantile Library's building.

The Mercantile Library Association was in many ways an experiment in self-governance by young merchants, a freestanding cultural institution receiving no funds other than those raised by its members and supporters. In this way, as Thomas Augst suggested in his article in the *American Quarterly*, the library was a proving ground for young businessmen eager to make a prominent place for themselves in the New York cultural world.⁸

It was indeed a successful enterprise. By 1870, the Mercantile Library was the fourth largest library in the United States. It housed a collection of more than 140,000 volumes, had a membership of almost 11,000, was visited by more than 1,000 people a day, and circulated hundreds of thousands of books, newspapers, and periodicals each year, including 12,000 by delivery wagon and an elaborate system of small depositories similar to postal boxes.

8. Thomas Augst, "The Business of Reading in Nineteenth-Century America: The New York Mercantile Library," *American Quarterly* 50, 2 (June 1998): 267–305.

Novels were the most requested type of book, and multiples of the most popular works were purchased and put into the collection (Disraeli's *Lothair* was represented by 700 copies; Twain's *Innocents Abroad* by 115, and Alcott's *Little Women* by 250). By the 1860s, the library offered evening classes in modern languages, elocution, music, and "phonography" (a shorthand system based on sound) and had established a small museum.

In the early 1870s, the library's board of trustees and administration initiated a series of lectures both at the library and off-site that established it as one of the foremost purveyors of public programs in New York, especially on literary topics. William Makepeace Thackeray, Bret Harte, and Henry Ward Beecher were popular speakers (as they were in other New York and Boston subscription libraries); and Mark Twain lectured several times during the decade with great popular appeal. Despite such successes, however, there was much dissent over the cost of the talks, which frequently lost money. As a result, the talks were discontinued and not revived to any great extent until the 1990s.

Transition to Public Libraries

Though the decline of subscription libraries in New York is often ascribed to competition created by the advent of tax-supported public libraries, Tom Glynn has argued that the rise of public libraries and their overshadowing of the multifactionalism of subscription libraries also is related to major shifts in the general belief in the expanded role of the public sphere. At this time, there was growing recognition that the public good would be served by broad-based support of, and public access to, cultural institutions and that the state's role was to even the field for all its constituents, in a sense creating a bureaucratic support and control of cultural institutions.

The state's increased role meant that tax-supported libraries, in the eyes of the general public, would appear to be free. Indeed, this development served the public good, but it also meant that library dues paid out of pocket by individuals *in addition to* taxes would appear to be a redundancy.

The result for New York's subscription libraries was a decline in importance in relation to the book-borrowing habits of the general public. Whereas in the last quarter of the nineteenth century New York's membership libraries could boast of memberships numbering in the tens of thousands, membership in the twentieth century experienced a gradual decline, even as longevity meant that their collections had become increasingly rich. By the end of the last century the total membership in New York's three surviving subscription libraries was just over 4,000, most of which was clustered in the New York Society Library, probably owing to its location in an affluent residential area. Support from endowments also became an increasingly important part of these libraries' survival, as the need for professional librarianship grew to keep pace with current standards and match the efficiency (or lack thereof, in some cases) of the public library systems. These libraries focused on the daily reading habits of an educated, though not scholarly, population, which generally craved the latest novels and literary nonfiction.

The Mercantile Library made explicit reference to this market when it reformed in the early 1990s. Throughout the twentieth century, the Mercantile Library in particular had watched its financial fortunes decline precipitously. In the late 1980s, it twice closed its doors to its members. In 1989, when it closed for the second time, the *New York Times* published an article wondering whether, after 169 years, it would ever reopen.⁹

In 1990, the Mercantile Library reopened, having acknowledged—as it had to some extent in the mid-nineteenth century—that its role in New York's cultural life had always been to circulate fiction to the public. It then set about establishing an identity as a library for literature, with related programs and collections and with enough success to stanch its losses and rebuild for the future.

Other subscription libraries have performed similar adjustments. Only two decades ago, the Athenaeum Music and Art Library of La Jolla, founded in 1899,

9. Richard Shepard, "Mercantile Library to Close," *The New York Times*, 10 August 1989, C1.

changed from a general library into a thriving arts center in that affluent community and a major cultural institution for San Diego. The Athenaeum of Philadelphia, under the three-decades-long tenure of Roger Moss, has developed one of the most extraordinary collections of materials on American architecture and design. The St. Louis Mercantile Library Association, now an autonomous division of the University of Missouri at St. Louis, amassed one of America's best collections on the westward movement of the United States. The strength of these subscription libraries usually lies in their buildings, many of which are national landmarks; their city, neighborhood, and family tradition of membership; and their rich, historic collections.

The twentieth century was not a propitious era for New York's membership libraries, as public library expansion captured the attention of the general public. The three institutions essentially are still libraries for the general public, concentrating their circulation on contemporary literature. Although financial stability no longer seems to be a problem, they are book-oriented institutions in an increasingly electronic era. Their strength may lie in the diversity of collections that have been built over the centuries in which book loss and theft have been much lower than in public libraries.

However, their future role is uncertain in a New York cultural arena crowded with more than 150 public library branches, private club libraries, university libraries, freestanding research libraries, dozens of bookstores, and more than a hundred other nonprofit organizations that present literary programs. How they make adjustments to the new century will determine whether they can regain a measure of the relevance they enjoyed more than a century ago.

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