

AMERICA'S MEMBERSHIP LIBRARIES

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The Circulation Hall includes an eighteenth-century Dutch grandfather clock.

The New York Society Library

EST. 1754

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Mark Bartlett and Sara Elliott Holliday

THE NEW YORK SOCIETY LIBRARY, THE OLDEST IN NEW York City, was founded in 1754 by the New York Society, a civic-minded group which felt that a well-stocked collection of books would help the city to prosper. Marion King captured the mission of the Society Library in the title of her 1954 publication, *Books and People: Five Decades of New York's Oldest Library*, for the library's success derives from the passion of its trustees, staff, and members for books and — during the last half-century — from the gentle introduction of technological resources as well. It is telling that the Society Library's membership surveys for both 1988 and 2000 contained repeated requests from its members not to alter anything. The intersection of tradition and wise innovation in collections, spaces, and services creates the challenge and the heart of the modern Society Library.

The Founding and History of the Library

In early March 1754, six young professionals met to share their ideas for a civic service project. Although their city was the provincial capital throughout the colonial era and a place of enormous commercial activity, they felt that their fellow citizens lacked “a spirit of inquiry.” “The New York Society” decided that a public library “would be very useful, as well as ornamental to this city,” as they would later say in the library's Articles of Incorporation. Four of the library's founders were relatives: businessman Philip Livingston, later a signer of the Declaration of Independence; his younger brother

William Livingston, a lawyer who served in all three Continental Congresses and the 1787 Constitutional Convention; William's brother-in-law William Alexander, Earl of Stirling, who would follow a distinguished military career with one in politics; and the brothers' cousin Robert R. Livingston, later a judge. Joining them were their friends John Morin Scott, who would serve as a member of the Continental Congress and a founder of the Sons of Liberty, and William Smith, Jr., a lawyer and historian who documented the founders' mission and early meetings.

By April 8 the nascent library was being praised in the *New York Mercury*: "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." Because the library was the only public institution of its kind in the city, its founders referred to it simply as "the library;" others, however, soon began to refer to it as a civic club or society, and the name stuck. Contrary to the modern implications of class distinction, the Society Library was always intended to be open to anyone — free of charge — for research, with circulation and other services supported by fees, as is the case today.

The founders struck an agreement with the city fathers to take over an unused room in City Hall on the condition that they start their collection with the dusty books already stored there, leftovers from a failed attempt to form a library in 1730. Among those volumes were a number donated in 1713 by the Reverend John Sharpe, a missionary who dreamed of educating the inhabitants of the new world. If the founding of the library were dated from this collection alone, it would be the oldest independent library in the country. By May five trustees had been elected, including three of the founders, and they set out to build on Sharpe's foundation by ordering about 250 books from England. Early orders would be somewhat hampered by the outbreak of the French and Indian War later that year; books in the numbers required, however, were not available to order domestically until 1770.

Shares in the library were sold for small amounts, entitling the holders to use of the library and the right to elect trustees. Non-shareholders could also take out books, with fees varying depending on the size of the book. Almost immediately the shareholders became embroiled in a plot to oust devotees of the Church of England from the board, yet early influential participants included the Franks family of prominent Jewish merchants, businesswoman Anne Waddell, and several Quakers. The collection would be open to the public only one or two days a week for its first few decades; its first "keeper," Benjamin Hildreth was procured in 1757. Until 1771 the library had no rivals; in that year, however, discussion of another institution motivated the board to draw up an official charter that would eventually be



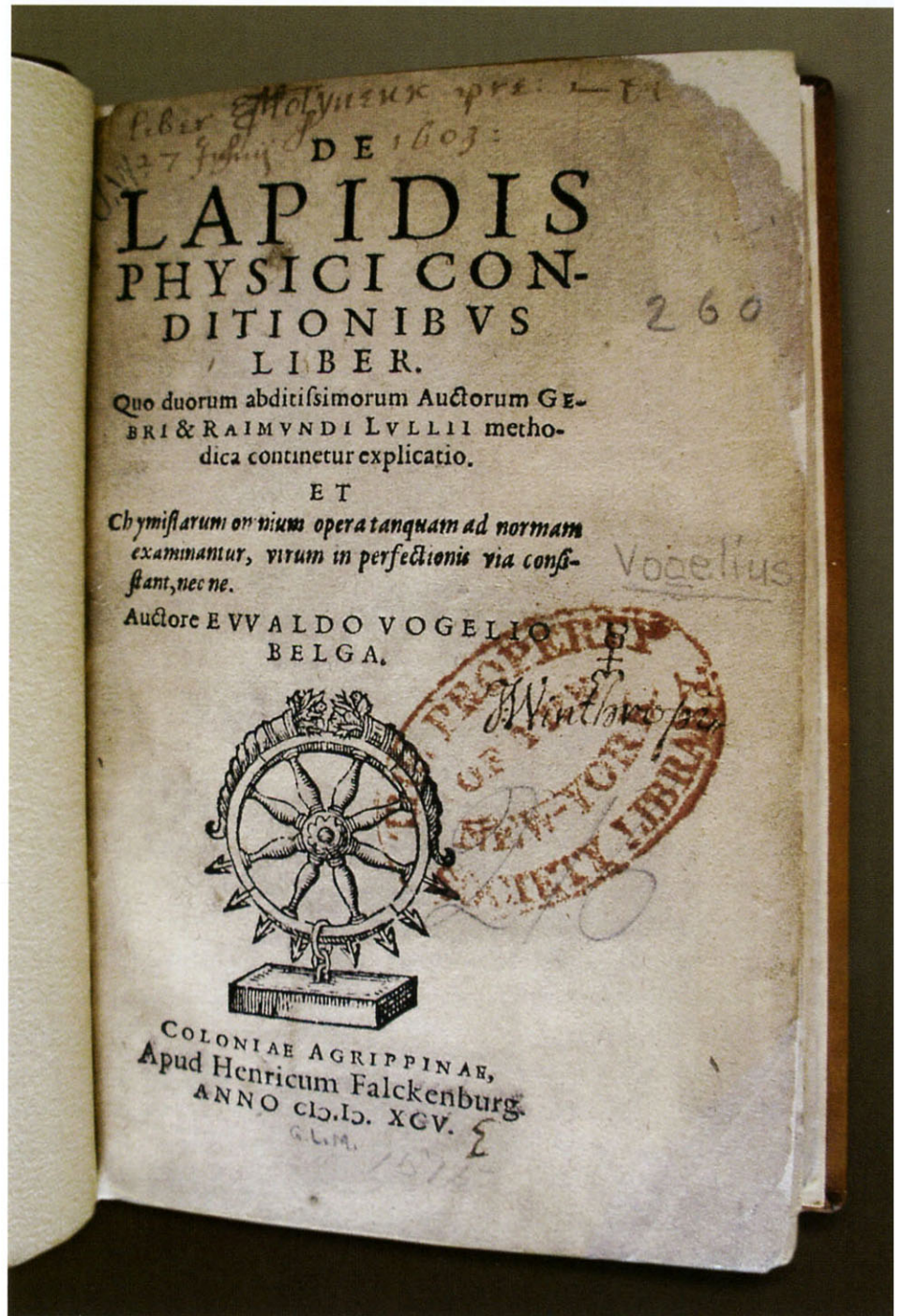
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The first-floor reference room is open to the public as well as to members; the table, built for the library's previous building, has hosted every board meeting for more than a century.

signed by the colonial governor and by King George III. A later librarian would take this document home for safekeeping in 1855, and it would not surface again until 1913; it is now in the library's archives.

Shortly after being officially sanctioned, the library almost ceased to exist during the increasing tension leading to the War for Independence and the fall of the city to the British. The politically divided board and shareholders ceased to meet in 1774, but the library stayed open until British troops moved into City Hall in 1776 and scattered the collection to the four winds. Soldiers on both sides looted books within the city and were rumored to have recycled them into musket cartridges. The library's next sign of life appeared in a timid 1788 newspaper advertisement requesting "such persons who have in their possession any of the books belonging to the New-York Society Library" to return them to one of the pre-war trustees. These returns, plus a trove of books buried in St. Paul's Chapel, revived the collection, which totaled about 3,100 items by the next year.

During the years when the national government resided in New York, it shared the library's building, giving the Society Library some claim to being the first Library of Congress. Certainly the charging ledger from this period



Ewald Vogel, *De Lapidis Physici Conditionibus Liber*. Cologne, 1595.
From the collection of Governor John Winthrop.

shows heavy use by members of the government, including John Jay (who would patronize the library with his family well into the nineteenth century), John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and even President George Washington. If that same ledger is to be believed, Washington checked out two volumes of Emer de Vattel's *The Law of Nations*, but returned only one, proving that the great are not immune to common vices. When debate was raging regarding the permanent site of the federal government, the city used the library's usefulness as an argument for keeping New York City the nation's capital.

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By the time New York lost that debate, the library was outgrowing its tenancy in City Hall, and during 1794–1795 it built and relocated to a handsome Federal-style brownstone on Nassau Street. This was also the year in which a dynasty began in the librarianship, with John Forbes, a 19-year-old Scottish immigrant, taking the job of “keeper.” He would raise his family and live in the library until his death thirty years later, to be succeeded by his son Philip, with a brief regency by Philip's brother-in-law. Philip Jones Forbes in turn lived and breathed the library until 1854, when financial troubles forced him out of the position. His son John would return as an assistant librarian from 1873 until his death in 1890. Since the library's basic membership has long been based on the household, many families continued as members or trustees for several generations.

The library had its own monetary troubles in the early nineteenth century, remaining constantly in debt until 1851. A fire destroyed the library's block and killed five people in 1808, but Librarian Forbes, his family, and neighbors saved the library, probably with a bucket brigade. These struggles aside, the institution grew peacefully in books and shareholders in the place a trustee dubbed “The Hall of Science.” Something like the current rare-book collections began to be set aside in this era, including volumes donated by the library of colonial governor John Winthrop in 1812, and the “Italian Library” of Lorenzo Da Ponte in 1827. The board created committees to oversee the building and advise on book purchases, practices that continue today. Trustee Washington Irving portrayed this era in his *Knickerbocker History* with a description of the “City Library.”

The board almost suffered a coup in 1825 led by a group of shareholders who had misinterpreted the library's charter and wished to convert it into a bank. The incumbent trustees managed to have the election legally voided and the library remained a library. The controversy may have been sparked by a competing institution, the New York Athenaeum, whose founders wanted a livelier place — part museum and part lecture hall — as well as a collection of books. Fifteen years later the Society Library and the Athenaeum merged in a new, larger building on Broadway at Leonard Street. Rentals of

this building to the young National Academy of Design and touring entertainers offset the ongoing debt. Thus from 1840 to 1855 the library played host to lecturers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Edgar Allan Poe, to the magician Signor Blitz, to the Tyrolean Minstrels and to other musical and novelty acts. Visitors from around the world made a special stop at the library, including Charles Dickens, Henry David Thoreau, Daniel Webster, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Napoleon III. In 1851 the library's first major bequest, from Elizabeth Demilt, let the trustees begin the long climb out of debt. Other major donors would include Charles H. Contoit (whose 1883 gift included the elephant folios of member John James Audubon's *Birds of America*), Mrs. Matthew Astor Wilks, daughter of the infamous Hetty Green, and Sarah Parker Goodhue, whose 1917 bequest laid the foundation for almost every aspect of the contemporary library.

The Broadway building, with its multifarious activities, quickly stretched the library too thin, and it was sold in 1854–1855. Another major transition that year was the departure of longtime Librarian Philip Forbes. He was succeeded by the scholarly John MacMullen, who within a year quarreled with the board and was replaced by his assistant, Sanborn Wentworth Butler. Butler's would be the central voice of the library until his death in 1910; although poor health required that he surrender his position to Frank Barna Bigelow in 1896, he remained on staff as Librarian Emeritus.

Snug in a new home on University Place at Twelfth Street, the library began to show the outlines of the institution it is today. From the time of its founding, one of the library's major projects was the publication of a new catalog of its holdings approximately every decade. The last catalog was printed in 1850, listing a daunting 70,000 items and hinting at the collections' ongoing strengths in biography, travel writing, literature, and New York City history. It was subsequently replaced by the creation of supplements and annual reports to the shareholders. The collection continued to grow even during the Civil War, when the price of paper rose and the neighborhood was threatened with destruction during the Draft Riots. Following the war, the library settled into a long contented period, when one newspaper described it as "peacefully slumbering." At the start of its residence on University Place, the library was located in the northern residential part of the city; over the eighty-plus years before the next move, the population center moved uptown, thus making long-distance requests and deliveries more crucial. Around the turn of the twentieth century, much taller buildings on all sides made the main reading room too dark for anything but storage, reinforcing the institution's quiet isolation. Small developments continued to be made, however. In 1879 trustee Robert Lenox Kennedy founded the John Cleve Green special collection of art books and commissioned a beautiful

wood-paneled alcove to house them. The donation in 1896 of a new typewriter spurred the staff to recatalog the entire collection by the then-modern “dictionary” method and make it available via a card catalog. The project required a drastic expansion of the staff for two years; among the catalogers was Grace MacMullen, daughter of short-lived librarian John MacMullen.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, shareholders — now mostly the heirs of the actual purchasers — ceded the bulk of patronage to the household memberships that are the backbone of the institution today. This end of an era was marked by the publication of the library’s first official history by Austin Baxter Keep in 1908. In that year the staff comprised two administrators (Librarian Bigelow and Librarian Emeritus Butler), two circulation staff members, one cataloger, one shelver, and a handful of pages and delivery boys. One of the circulation staffers was the young Marion D. Morrison, later Marion King, who would write the second history of the library in 1954. Back in 1908 she revolutionized the library’s processes by substituting more flexible cards for the ponderous ledgers that had previously recorded circulation. With Helen Ruskell, who would also reign at the desk for more than fifty years, she kept track of the tastes of hundreds of members and their thousands of requests. The *New Book List*, a publication continuing to the present, also began around this time to inform members about which titles they might wish to request.

The custom of ordering selected books from England survived the Revolution and continues today; in 1912 several boxes of library-bound volumes were lost on the *Titanic*. The library has also consistently maintained moderate collections in French and other European languages. The first effect of World War I was that the staff stopped purchasing German books because patrons rejected them. Librarian Bigelow turned inflation during the war into a selling point, advertising in 1918 that the membership rate was the only price in New York that had stayed the same since 1914. A newspaper article in 1909 started the rumor that the library planned to move uptown, causing an uproar among the membership. In reality, moving was financially out of the question until, late in her life, Sarah Parker Goodhue fell out with the Metropolitan Museum of Art and instead made the library her legatee. In addition to \$385,000, her bequest in 1917 included about 700 books, furniture, antique china, and works of art. Like inflation, the stock market crash was a blessing in disguise for the library: in late 1929 subscriptions dropped, only to rise again as patrons realized the economy of borrowing rather than buying books.

By 1936 the investment of Mrs. Goodhue’s bequest yielded sufficient funds for the purchase of the John Shillito Rogers townhouse on east Seventy-Ninth Street. The back of the residence was torn out and rebuilt

into the existing twelve stack levels, and the move was made under the supervision of the new librarian, Edith Hall Crowell. Miss Crowell and her staff weeded the collections, dispatching little-used journals and books to more suitable institutions such as universities and museums; practically nothing was discarded. Weeding also gave the librarians the opportunity to locate and protect rare and fragile items, creating the extant closed-stack areas reserved for researchers. The concurrent recataloging of the collection to conform to the Dewey decimal system was almost as challenging a job as the move itself. All of it must nevertheless have seemed worthwhile when members who had been in comparative exile uptown now poured into the new, residentially centralized location.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the library prepared for the bombing or invasion of New York. Together with the Morgan and New York Public libraries, Miss Crowell arranged with upstate Skidmore College to store the Sharpe and Winthrop collections and other rare books. Board members organized blackouts, drills, and an emergency shelter, and allowed the Red Cross to use the building for first-aid classes. Staff members wrote to far-away shareholders, asking if they might lend their library privileges to refugees from England; over twenty responded.

Sylvia Hilton succeeded to the Librarianship in 1954 and capably guided the institution through the next 23 years, including one of its most unusual episodes. In 1973 it was discovered that the first-edition of Audubon's *Birds of America* elephant folios donated by Charles H. Contoitt in 1883 were missing — actually, that they had been stolen by a creative thief who had remained hidden in a closed stack after hours. The *Birds* had been split up and sold in the United States and abroad, and over the next three years Sylvia Hilton and head of cataloging Jean Burnham tracked almost all of them down, even traveling to London to visit auction houses and art dealers. When many of the unbound images had been recovered, the library sold them at auction for over \$1.1 million and used the money to renovate and modernize the building.

This renovation was also made possible by the new librarian, Mark Piel, who elected to live offsite and thus free up the space of the librarian's apartment. During Piel's tenure at the library from 1978 to 2004, the board increased in number and became more active, extending committee work to special events, children's programming, and other areas; at the suggestion of trustee Shirley Hazzard, they also revived the task of recommending books for the collection. An annual fund drive to supplement membership fees and endowment income began in 1979, and a capital drive from 1993 to 1996 funded the conversion of the catalog to online form. In 1994 a quarterly newsletter started keeping members up to date on special events and

Auden, Mr. W. H.
 77 St. Mark's Place N.Y. 3
 Jan. 29, ~~1963~~ 1964

~~C1042~~ 1450

29 Jan '62	Hardenberg - Novalis - 1878	29 Feb '62
	" " Novalis 1902	29 Feb '62
	Halifax - Wastes ed. R. L. ...	31 Jan '62
	Delacroix - Journal - trans	31 Jan '62
31 Jan '62	Chesterton - W. H. W. W. W.	29 Feb '62
	J. G. ... - Man & ...	1 Feb '62
	" " - On Love	29 Feb '62
	F. Fitzgerald - Midsummer	1 Feb '62
1 Feb '62	Rhodes - Fatal Fool	5 Feb '62
	Ramage - Beautiful Thoughts	2 Feb '62
	Schiller - Essays	2 Feb '62
	Chesterton - Allis ...	2 Feb '62
	" " I Survey	2 Feb '62
	" - Browne's ...	2 Feb '62
2 Feb '62	Mitchell, Man who grew ...	29 Feb '62
	Lehmann, Turgenev's ...	5 Feb '62
	Patmore, Rod of ...	5 Feb '62
	Iselgin, Tale of ...	5 Feb '62
	Santayana, Atoms of ...	5 Feb '62
5 Feb '62	Wilson - ...	8 Feb '62
	Osail - ...	8 Feb '62
	Buschardt - ...	8 Feb '62
	... - ...	8 Feb '62
	... - ...	8 Feb '62
8 Feb '62	Siebert - ...	13 Feb '62

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W. H. Auden was a longtime member of the library whose diverse reading tastes are shown in the books he checked out during one month in 1962.

changes to the library. In 1996 the library founded the New York City Book Awards, given annually to the best books about New York City and providing a source of small but gratifying publicity for the library. Co-sponsorship of Project Cicero, an annual book drive benefiting New York City public schools, began in 2001.

In 1904 the board observed the library's sesquicentennial with a historical exhibition; in 1954 they held a dinner. The 250th anniversary in 2004 brought more than 400 members and friends — adults and children — to a weekend of receptions, musical and dramatic events, and readings by authors from books with a colonial New York theme, commemorating that season in March and April 1754 when, as historian Austin Baxter Keep put it, the New York Society Library "first drew breath." In 1872 trustee Thomas Ward had envisioned the library a century later, "permanently established in some beautiful portion of our upper island in an elegant and commodious edifice, with a spacious reading-room enriched with fountains and statuary; with a noble library of 200,000 volumes; with a list of 3,000 shareholders." Allowing for a lack of fountains and the predominance of household memberships over shareholders, the library is proud to have realized his vision and to continue to do so into the new millennium.

Notable Members

Any institution that has existed for over 250 years both reflects and participates in a number of historical events, but the library also takes pride in having served as a haven and inspiration for many acclaimed authors and other notable personalities. Outside researchers frequently discover the library through references to Herman Melville, who was a shareholder throughout his most productive years. In the late 1840s, he kept William Scoresby's *An Account of the Arctic Regions with a History and Description of the Northern Whale-Fishery* out for about thirteen months. Presumably irate staff members were mollified when *Moby-Dick* eventually appeared as a result. Assistant librarian Marion King tells the story of "a rather short, stocky lady in an apple green coat with matching green pork-pie felt hat" who approached the desk one day to inquire about membership, saying "My name is Cather. I'm by way of being a writer." A few years after this literary star began her regular visits, she left the library in snowy weather with a younger member, Truman Capote. As he recounts in his memoirs, she invited him out for a drink and asked him about his favorite current books. He raved about *My Antonia* and asked if she had read it. "Actually, I wrote it," she replied.

Other names of note appear in many fields, such as novelists Djuna Barnes, John Dos Passos, and Henry James (through his father's household membership), poets W.H. Auden, Edgar Lee Masters, and Ogden Nash, children's authors Walter R. Brooks, Roald Dahl, and Paula Danziger, historians Walter Lord and Francis Steegmuller, playwrights Lillian Hellman (often a difficult patron) and Wendy Wasserstein, and others as diverse as Norman Vincent Peale and Susan Sontag. Nor is membership limited to writers. Mrs. King also recounts her long friendship with Mrs. Theodore Roosevelt; she and her entire family were frequent patrons. Composers Samuel Barber, Irving Berlin, and Leonard Bernstein darkened the library's doors, as did artists Edward Gorey, Maxfield Parrish, and Saul Steinberg. The tradition of providing space and resources for readers and writers of all kinds has accompanied the library throughout its two and a half centuries and continues as a vital part of its mission.

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The Rogers House and the Library Building

The New York Society Library's fifth home is at the center of the Upper East Side residential district near the intersection of Seventy-Ninth Street and Madison Avenue. The Italianate design with a Regency interior was created in 1916 by the noted firm of Trowbridge and Livingston, also the architects of the Wall Street headquarters of J.P. Morgan & Co., the St. Regis Sheraton Hotel, and the department store B. Altman's (now the Science, Industry, and Business branch of the New York Public Library). The original owners were John Shillito Rogers, a prominent lawyer, and his wife Catherine. In 1924 the magazine *American Homes of To-Day* called the interior "at once domestic, spacious, elegant, entirely right." The library purchased the building from the widowed Mrs. Rogers in 1936 and converted the back rooms into stacks to store its collections. The result is a front half with five floors and the look and feel of a private home or club, and a back half with twelve floors and a more functional atmosphere. With elevators serving both the front and back, most members soon find their way around the library quite easily.

Patrons enter through the bronze and glass front doors, ascend a shallow marble staircase, and find themselves in the Circulation Hall or lobby, with a long dark oak circulation desk flanked by a smaller reference desk and shelves of new books for browsing. Off the lobby is the Reference Room, paneled in wood and containing the century-old card catalog as well as online catalog terminals and reference books. The oval leather-topped table in this room was brought from the library's previous building, where it had been commissioned for \$55 in 1856.

A grand staircase to the second floor is lined with portraits of the Clarkson and Goodhue families, ancestors of Charles Clarkson Goodhue, whose widow donated the portraits as well as the money to purchase the building. Library exhibitions take place under a large gold chandelier on the second-floor landing. The second floor's central attraction is the main reading room, the Members' Room, where current periodicals are displayed and are available for their perusal. This room is also used as a lecture space. The cheerful Children's Library covers the bulk of the third floor, with fiction and nonfiction collections lining the walls, tables for studying, and a hospitable alcove for picture-book reading. A smaller reading room named in honor of trustee Arnold Whitridge is also on this floor, as is the Head Librarian's office. The sunny fourth floor is the home of the Cataloguing, Systems, Acquisitions, and Conservation departments and of the glass-walled Charles H. Marshall Rare Book Reading Room. Stacks 8 and 10, which adjoin front floors three and four, are closed stacks containing, respectively, the library's archives and rare-book collection. Members who write in the library most often retire to the fifth floor, which features a comfortable large study room with built-in desks and internet access, as well as two individual study rooms that are much in demand.

The stacks in the rear of the building are open to members and feature timed bulbs that led a member to describe the experience of "finding just the right book before the lights go out!" Each stack holds about 20,000 volumes; one entire stack is devoted to biography and two to history. Most stacks have small additional study areas, and Stack 12 is now the home of the elegant Green Alcove, constructed in the previous building and relocated in 1937. Artworks and the library's historical documents are displayed throughout the building. These include paintings by Samuel Lovett Waldo, Adolphe William Bouguereau, and Joseph Wright, graphic works by John James Audubon and Will Barnet, and sculptures by Hiram Powers and Thomas Crawford. The Society Library is a New York City landmark building.

The Contemporary Library and Its Functions

The Society Library is a registered not-for-profit corporation. Its funding comes from membership fees, annual tax-deductible contributions, and income from its endowment (built mainly from bequests). Memberships are open to anyone 18 or over and are currently priced at \$200 (annual household membership) and \$150 (six-month household membership). Other memberships are also available to students and educators, schools, not-for-profit organizations, and corporations. Although only registered members

can browse the stacks and use the member and study rooms, the library is open for reference to anyone who comes through the door. Currently there are 12 full-time and 19 part-time staff members in the library. The Head Librarian works closely with the board of trustees and is responsible for overseeing the various areas and functions of the library: circulation, reference, acquisitions (collection development), cataloging, rare books, conservation, children's, events, and building maintenance. In 1754 five men formed the first board of trustees; today the board has 24 members, 11 of them women. Most sit on one or more of 12 committees that are a vital part of the institution (including committees to oversee finance, development, the building, lectures and exhibitions, book selection, the Children's Library, and member relations). As Henry S. F. Cooper, Jr., and Jenny Lawrence observed in the 250th anniversary book, "after 1954, writers who lived in the neighborhood and used the library flooded onto the board: Louis Auchincloss, Arnold Whitridge, Walter Lord, Jacques Barzun, Brendan Gill, Barbara Tuchman, Shirley Hazzard, Robert Caro, and Benita Eisler, among others." The library is fortunate to have the contributions of many in the literary world today.

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The current collection has more than 270,000 volumes, a varied collection of art, statues, porcelain, maps, and manuscripts, and a number of named special collections. From its beginning the library's goal has been to build "a Proper Collection of Books," as was advertised in a 1754 issue of the *New-York Mercury*. Today's collection reflects the selection skills and reading interests of its staff and members over the last two centuries — and, in a larger sense, the literary interests of New Yorkers. The collections are particularly strong in the humanities, including English and American literature and criticism, biography, English, European, and American history, the social sciences, the arts, exploration, travel, and books about New York City. The collection today is large and varied enough for both the general reader and the researcher. The library subscribes to over a hundred periodicals, magazines, and newspapers, and it also holds large-type books and non-print books. The non-print items are unabridged books on tape and compact disc including classic fiction by such writers as Dickens, Trollope, Austen, Hawthorne, Hemingway, Wharton, Dostoevsky, Kafka, and a smattering of drama, biography, and history. More recently, the library has started to provide its members access to electronic resources, including such services as the *New York Times* archive, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *American National Biography*, *Patron Books in Print*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*. Libraries throughout the world have improved the sharing of collections, and the Society Library has made efforts to be part of this growing network. Through an interlibrary loan service established in 1992, readers and

WIDOWERS' HOUSES.

Act I.

restaurant
much
(In the garden of ~~an~~ ^a Hotel at Remagen on the Rhine, on a fine afternoon in August. Tables and chairs under the trees. The gate leading from the garden to the river side is on the left. The hotel is on the left right. It has a ~~big~~ wooden annexe with an entrance marked Table d'Hôte. ^{A waiter is} ~~Waiter~~ in attendance.)

(A couple of English tourists come out of the hotel. The younger, ^{Dr} Harry Trench, is about 24, stoutly built, thick ^{in the} neck, ^{with} close-cropped ^{and} black hair, ^{in the} ~~with~~ undignified medical-student manners, frank, hasty, rather boyish. The other, ^{Mr. William de Ruygh} Cokane, is older - probably over 40, possibly 50 - an ill nourished, scanty haired gentleman, with ~~carefully~~ affected manners, fidgety, touchy, and constitutionally ridiculous in uncompassionate eyes).

C O K A N E

(On the threshold of the hotel, calling peremptorily to the waiter) Two beers for us out here. (The waiter goes for the beer. ^{comes down into the garden} Cokane ~~joins Trench~~) We have got the room with the best view in the hotel, Harry, ~~all~~ thanks to my tact. We'll leave in the morning and do Mainz and Frankfurt. There is a very graceful female

Draft script of George Bernard Shaw's *Widowers' Houses*.

researchers have access to thousands of titles not available in the library stacks or the New York Public Library.

The New York Society Library has numerous special collections that are used by members, scholars, and laypersons from around the country, and indeed the world. The books in the Sharpe Collection were originally purchased by the Reverend John Sharpe, who gave them to the city of New York to establish a “publick library, which would very much advance both learning and piety.” The Sharpe Collection includes some of the oldest printed books known to have been in New York City. The Winthrop Collection of books on chemistry and alchemy came from the collection of John Winthrop, the father of American chemistry and first governor of Connecticut. At one point Winthrop owned the largest and best scientific library in the colonies, containing more than a thousand volumes. In 1812 Winthrop’s descendents dispersed his substantial book collection to Harvard, Yale, New York Hospital, and other institutions; the Society Library received 292 volumes.

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The James Hammond Circulating Library, founded in 1811, originally included over 8,000 volumes of fiction, plays, poetry, and non-fiction. Hammond, a Newport, Rhode Island merchant, opened a lending library in his dry goods shop. After his death in 1866, his estate was sold at auction and trustee Robert Lenox Kennedy purchased parts of the Hammond collection for the Society Library. The collection today comprises several hundred fiction titles published between 1725 and 1850, including many rare printings from the Minerva Press of London and various small American presses. Lorenzo Da Ponte, the illustrious Italian who was Mozart’s librettist for *Nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così Fan Tutte*, resided in New York after 1805, where he taught Italian at Columbia College, helped establish the Italian Opera House, and ran a bookshop. Da Ponte gave about 600 volumes (the Italian Society Library) to the library in 1827 for use by his Italian students. Among the collection’s treasures are a first edition of Da Ponte’s memoirs, given to the library by Clement Clark Moore in 1807, and a unique early record of the collection’s books and use with handwritten notes by Da Ponte himself.

The Green Art Collection is named after John Cleve Green, a China trader, railroad entrepreneur, and philanthropist. Green, whose three children died young, returned his wealth to the community through charitable endowments to hospitals, educational institutions, and libraries. Under Mr. Green’s will, the Library received \$50,000 in 1877, the net income to be “applied to the purchase and binding of books — one half to works relating to the Fine Arts.” The most recent special collection to be given to the library is the Sharaff/Sze Collection, from the bequest of Oscar-winning

costume designer Irene Sharaff and artist and writer Mai-Mai Sze. It includes twentieth-century literature (many first editions), British and Chinese art, philosophy, and religion. Other individual volumes in the library's collection used by researchers include Sir Walter Scott's manuscript of *Castle Dangerous* and a prompt copy of George Bernard Shaw's play *Too True to Be Good*. Researchers have also discovered the library's own charging ledgers and membership records to be a source of insight into New York and American social and literary history.

A part-time conservator takes care of both basic and complex conservation and preservation of the library's varied collections, including its rare books, circulating books, periodicals, maps, and manuscripts. Because of the age and fragility of many of the library's special collections, this function is becoming increasingly important.

Each year the Society adds about 4,500 purchased and gift volumes. The library's historic mission has been to be a reader's library, although as the institution has aged, many volumes have become rare and specialized books, used by a variety of researchers and scholars. Members' requests are generally purchased by the acquisitions department for the collection; in some cases the requests are anticipated by the library and are already in the lobby or stacks. The library has always relied on published reviews of new books; the acquisitions librarian reads reviews and publishing announcements in such varied sources as the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Spectator*, *New York Review of Books*, *New York Times Book Review*, *Literary Review*, and *Publishers Weekly*. Recommendations from the Book Committee, a group of readers and writers with diverse interests and resources, are another major source of collection growth. Throughout the library's history, its member writers and visiting speakers have been very generous in donating copies, often inscribed to the library. Deaccessioning in recent years has happened under the supervision of subject specialists who examine specific areas of the collection (for example, economics or social sciences).

During most of the twentieth century, technology at the Society Library meant such inventions as the telephone, the typewriter, the adding machine, and the photocopier. The first computer entered the building in 1986, prompting board chairman Henry S.F. Cooper Jr. to write, "We have recently acquired a computer, which should facilitate such matters as sending out notices to members, keeping records, and running the fund drive. Although this is the library's first brush with the computer age, addresses and record-keeping are probably just the thin edge of the wedge, and we will doubtless think of more wonderful things to do." It was not until May 1998 that the library introduced an online catalog system (GEAC Advance) for its members and staff. Public computer terminals are located throughout the

building, providing the members with searchable access to the catalog records, holdings, and circulation status information. In 2004 the library migrated to a more modern and robust online system, Innovative Interfaces, that provides both a web-based online catalog to its members and modules for acquisitions, cataloging, circulation, serials, and systems for its growing staff. Members can now access their patron records for renewals and other functions, search the online catalog more effectively, and use a suite of electronic resources. But one of the oldest library technologies still exists, doesn't require electricity, and is still used by members: the stately and substantial card catalog, located in the main reference room off the lobby. Although the card catalog was closed in 1989, with minimal changes made to it since then, many members nevertheless choose to start their search for a book by opening one of its many drawers.

The Children's Library is an increasingly vibrant part of the institution. The department's shelves house about 40,000 volumes for preschool, middle-school, and young-adult readers. Since a full-time children's librarian was hired again in 2000, the library has flourished and hundreds of families have joined. Programs are held throughout the year; these include preschool story-and-craft events, author visits, and writing workshops. In 2001 the Children's Library helped create Project Cicero, a book drive that provides new and gently used books to classrooms and libraries in under-funded city schools. This project has been a resounding success, with hundreds of thousands of books distributed each winter. The Children's Library also started the Young Writers Awards in 2003, honoring submissions from young writers of library member families and member schools.

The introduction of library programs and events in the 1990s was an echo of the 1840s, when in its Broadway building the library rented a lecture hall to speakers and entertainers. Modern-day events include book discussion groups, lectures, readings, and theatrical and musical performances. Events reflect the literary tastes of the library's members, with fiction, biography, history, travel, and drama all being common themes in the annual schedule. The New York City Book Awards ceremony, held annually in May, brings together the authors and illustrators of the year's best books about New York City, their publishers, and our members. Members also take advantage of technology and library resource classes offered over the last few years. Classes are given on everything from computer basics, word processing, the online catalog, and internet search engines to printed reference books, the library's rare book treasures, and resources for biography readers.

Recognizing the need to promote and advertise its collections, programs, and special events to its members, the library issues a regular newsletter, *Library Notes*. More of the library's members have become com-

puter users over the years, with the last survey taken in 2000 showing that 85 percent of members own or have access to a computer and close to 80 percent have email and use the internet. The library's website serves as both the home of the online catalog and the starting point for online library information: a staff directory, events list, new books in the collection, library history, annual reports, and special collections profiles. A refrain occasionally heard at the front desk — “was your website down yesterday?” — would certainly have been strange to staff members a century or two ago.

Closing Remarks

Throughout the library's history, members have been passionate about the privilege and the pleasure of browsing the library's open stacks. Sometimes members request directions to an exact floor and location (“Where's that Bill McKibben book *The End of Nature?*”), but more often they ask a more general question (“Where are your philosophy books?”) and head to one of the nine open stacks on a private journey, browsing the shelves, lingering longer than planned, and coming back to the lobby with more than they originally intended to carry away.

Librarians and trustees have summarized the library's mission in various forms over the centuries. The most recent approximation was published in the 2002 Long-Range Planning Report: “the New York Society Library, founded in 1754 and the oldest now existing library in the city, is dedicated to making available to general-interest readers and scholars a wide variety of books and other resources in a comfortable, attractive setting that gives its members and other users a quiet place for reading and study not easily found in a large, crowded, energetic city. The library seeks to provide a high level of personal attention and expertise for those it serves. It also has a number of programs, ranging from small discussion groups for its members to outreach programs designed to help the larger New York City community. The goal of the library is to serve its members and community as it has for generations and to add new services, in such areas as technology, to help meet the needs of an increasingly complex world.”

The Society Library is accomplishing its mission if its members continue to cherish it and think of it as a place like no other. A common theme in all three histories of the library is its members' love for the institution, its traditions, and its careful changes. It has been called a “treasure of calm and usefulness in our city” (Elizabeth Hardwick), a “wonderful place to escape into the world of a wonderful book” (Robert A. Caro), “a place to think, to study, to daydream, and simply to immerse myself in print” (Laurence

Bergreen), and perhaps most succinctly, a “haven” (Wendy Wasserstein). As retired head librarian Mark Piel wrote in his final annual report (in 2004), the library has been and will be “a place for like-minded readers, caught and stirred by the written word.”

Further Reading

www.nysoclib.org

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