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History of Libraries in the Western World

Fourth Edition

Michael H. Harris



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throughout the industrialized cities of America in order to "promote orderly and virtuous habits, diffuse knowledge and the desire for knowledge, improve the scientific skill," and generally make effective citizens and productive workers of the mechanics working in America's factories, and the mercantile clerks training for management of her commerce.

The organization of the social library was usually very simple. In the smaller ones, there was little or no attempt to arrange the books except in general classifications, but in the larger collections more serious attempts were made at cataloging, ranging from simple manuscript accession records to printed alphabetical or classified lists. Housing for the collection might be in a public building, a member's home or business, or, for larger collections, a separate rented or owned building. Hours of opening ranged from a few hours one or two days per week to fairly regular schedules of eight to ten hours daily. An attendant, volunteer or paid, charged books and checked on their return in the smaller collections, but the larger ones had more or less full-time "librarians." As early as 1793, a pamphlet had been written to advise the book selectors for social libraries on the best methods of obtaining books and the best books to be chosen. This was the *Selected Catalogue of Some of the Most Esteemed Publications in the English Language Proper to Form a Social Library*, written by Thaddeus Mason Harris, who had served for a short time as a librarian at Harvard. His booklet was one of the earliest American works on book selection, and as such it is interesting. He divided all books into three classes: memory, reason, and imagination. The first class included all phases of history, biography, and travel; the second, science, philosophy, and religion; and the third, poetry drama, fiction, and art. In all, he recommended only eighty-one titles, but these were well selected for the time and purpose. Ordinarily, the smaller social libraries bought only a few new books each year, but collectively they made up a major book market, so the book publishers and dealers soon came to offer them special discounts to secure their trade.

The social library proved an efficient means for meeting the growing reading appetite of America's rapidly increasing population. However, it was characterized by a fatal flaw—the principle of voluntary support—and as Jesse H. Shera has noted, "the shifting sands" of voluntary support were proving inadequate to the task of supporting the widespread and efficient library service so desired by

library advocates throughout the nation. Especially troublesome was the tendency of social libraries to fail during hard financial times. The depressions of 1819, 1837, and 1857 all pressed severe economic deprivation upon the nation, and people were forced to withdraw support from all sorts of cultural and recreational activities, including social libraries. As a consequence, many American communities lost their library service every time the region experienced difficult financial times. Such instability was simply unacceptable to those who believed that libraries were essential, for whatever reason, to the success of the Republic. Their efforts to discover a form of support which would be capable of bringing stability and energy to library service led them eventually to the idea of supporting libraries with public tax funds.

Thus the many variations on the social library model first formulated by Franklin and his young friends in Philadelphia constitute a significant chapter in the unfolding story of the rise of the public library. Indeed, when the public library was established in the latter half of the 19th century, it either absorbed the local social library or, in many cases, actually found its origins in the gift of the collection belonging to the social library. At any rate, social libraries had limited futures once public libraries were established in their respective communities, and only the unique, or those boasting the most impressive of traditions—like the Library Company of Philadelphia—are still in existence.

The nation's social libraries were generally promoted as serious sources of knowledge for those who desired to improve themselves. They did not, at least openly, cater to the public taste for romance and popular fiction, choosing instead to purchase only the best nonfiction and some few classic works of fiction. The public's voracious appetite for romance was filled by libraries designed as commercial ventures and aimed at stocking only the most popular and exciting of the new fiction. These libraries, called "circulating" libraries, made their first appearance just prior to the American Revolution.

Maintained usually by printshops or bookstores, these "libraries" made available rental books for a small fee, either a book at a time or a number of books over a given period of time. Possibly the first of these rental collections was opened by William Rind in Annapolis, Maryland, in 1762. He proposed to allow his customers the use of two books at a time for an annual fee of twenty-seven shillings. His

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