Subscription Libraries and Commercial Circulating Libraries

In Colonial Philadelphia and New York

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From the 1730s to the 1760s, all American circulating libraries were subscription libraries. They were owned and supported by private individual shareholders, who could borrow books so long as they paid their annual subscription dues. Some were also open to the general public for reference, and some, like the Library Company of Philadelphia, even had provisions for non-shareholders to borrow books upon payment of a cash deposit. Then in the 1760s a new type of library suddenly appeared, commercial circulating libraries. These were individually owned -- generally by booksellers -- and patrons could borrow books for a modest fee. Because their owners were entrepreneurs who hoped to turn a profit, they tended to reach out to the public by advertisement, by making their premises inviting especially to women, and by stocking the most current and popular books. In towns where there was already a well-established subscription library, these new libraries appealed to readers who could not afford or did not have the social position to join a subscription library. They offered a different type of reading material and a different type of reading experience. There is no direct evidence of outright competition for readers between these two types of library, but indirect evidence can be found in changes that occurred in subscription libraries at the exact times and places where commercial circulating libraries began to flourish. These changes included more

liberal access policies and a more popular choice of books, and they tended to make the older libraries more like the new commercial ones. This kind of competition can only be inferred in cities with a complex library environment, including both numerous circulating libraries and multiple subscription libraries with a strong public presence. There were only two such cities in the colonies, New York, and Philadelphia. This paper will focus mainly on Philadelphia, where documentation is plentiful in the archives of the Library Company of Philadelphia and in the circulation register of a 1770 commercial library. However glancing reference is made to New York, suggesting a similar competitive environment there.

At the end of the first part of his *Autobiography*, written in 1771, Franklin described the founding of the Library Company in 1731.

> And now I set on foot my first Project of a public Nature, that for a Subscription Library. I drew up the Proposals … and by the help of my Friends in the Junto, procur'd Fifty Subscribers of 40/ each to begin with & 10/ a Year… This was the Mother of all the N American Subscription Libraries now so numerous.[1]

Following his terminology, these libraries are still called "subscription libraries," as if the apparatus of subscribing, buying shares, and paying annual dues was their defining characteristic. When Franklin resumed his *Autobiography* in 1784, he told the same story again, but this time emphasizing other aspects of the Library Company: it was also a public library and a circulating library.

> Not having any Copy here [in Passy] of what is already written, I know not whether an Account is given of the means I used to establish the Philadelphia publick Library…. I will therefore begin there… The Members of the Junto [Franklin's discussion group for mutual improvement] had … hired a Room to hold our Club in. I propos'd that we should all of us bring our Books to that Room, where they would not only be ready to consult in our Conferences, but become a common Benefit, each of us being at Liberty to borrow such as he

[1] *Benjamin Franklin. Writings.* J.A. Leo Lemay, ed. New York, The Library of America, 1372.

> wish'd to read at home. … Finding the Advantage of this little Collection, I propos'd to render the Benefit from Books more common by commencing a Public Subscription Library. [2]

His object was to build a permanent reference collection, "ready to consult," but also a collection that would circulate to those who "wish'd to read at home." He also wished it to be open to the public, not just shareholders. According to the "Short Account of the Library" appended to its first extant catalogue (1741),

> Those who are not Subscribers may notwithstanding borrow Books, Leaving in the Hands of the Librarian, as a Pledge, a Sum of Money proportion'd to the Value of the Book borrow'd, and paying a small Acknowledgment for the Reading.[3]

In practice, non-members were required to pay from 4 to 8 pence per week depending on the size of the book, and to leave a cash deposit of twice the book's value with the Librarian. The Library Company was by no means free, but it placed a substantial library within the reach of most middle-class Philadelphians. In 1742 the Proprietors of Pennsylvania formally chartered Franklin's library as a company, what we would call a non-profit organization, having demonstrated that it operated for the public benefit. This was as close to a public library as any in colonial America.

Before 1731 circulating libraries in the colonies were rare. Of the three known 17th century New England town libraries, in Boston, New Haven, and Concord, Massachusetts, only Concord had regular provisions for borrowing books.[4] Thomas Prince imagined a circulating collection adjunct to his New England Library in 1726, but

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[2] Ibid., 1379-80

[3] *A Catalogue of Books belonging to the Library Company of Philadelphia,* Philadelphia: Printed by B. Franklin, 1741, 56.

[4] Jesse H. Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library: The Origins of the Public Library Movement in New England, 1629-1855.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949, 25.

that part of his scheme was deemed impractical and apparently not implemented.[5] Not until the Revolutionary era did students regularly borrow books from Harvard's library.[6]

The only circulating libraries known to be functioning in the colonies when Franklin was a young man were adjuncts to the libraries established by English philanthropist Thomas Bray around 1700. Bray set up Provincial Libraries in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston, and smaller Parochial Libraries in a number of towns and villages throughout the colonies. He intended the Provincial and Parochial Libraries to be permanent reference libraries, but he saw a need for circulating collections as well, so he added a "Layman's Library" to each of them. These consisted of a selection of popular devotional works that the ministers could loan to parishioners and discuss with them when they were returned. He included multiple titles of some books so they could be given away, especially where they might help lure sinners into the fold. Bray established 42 Layman's Libraries and sent over 34,000 additional books and tracts to be given away, but no trace of them has survived. It is doubtful that any of these libraries lasted very long. Nor were they expected to; Bray intended them to be dispersed gradually among the people.[7]

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[5] Hugh Amory, "A Boston Society Library: The Old South Church and Thomas Prince,"1-3. I am grateful to Judy Amory for providing a copy of this unpublished paper. Amory notes that Prince "also left his Church 'all my Books that are in Latin, Greek, & in the Oriental Languages, to be kept, and remain in the Public Library for ever.' This second 'Public' or 'South Church Library,' according to its separate bookplate, goes back to 1718, when Prince began to serve as the Church's pastor with his classmate Joseph Sewall. It is next attested in 1726, when he approached Judge Sewall, Joseph's father, with a 'Schem for a Lending Library.' The Judge deemed it 'inconvenient' – i.e. an inappropriate project for a church."

[6] Mark Olsen and Louis-Georges Harvey, "Reading in Revolutionary Times: Book Borrowing from the Harvard College Library, 1773-1782, in *Harvard Library Bulletin,* n.s. 4:3 (Fall 1993) 57-72, describes the first surviving records of books charged to Harvard students. There was sporadic borrowing by students before that date. Cf. Thomas Hollis's admonishing letter of 1735: "You let your books be taken at pleasure to Mens houses, and many are lost. Your (boyish) Students take them to their chambers, and teare out pictures and Maps to adorne the Walls; such things are not good." Quoted in Peter J. Gomes, "Thomas Hollis of London and his Gifts," *Harvard Library Bulletin,* n.s. 13:2 (Summer 2002) 11.

[7] Charles T. Laugher, *Thomas Bray's Grand Design: Libraries of the Church of England in America, 1695-1785,* Chicago: American Library Association, 1973, 34, 52-54.

In at least one instance, however, local authorities modified Bray's scheme and made his whole library into a circulating collection. In 1700 the South Carolina Assembly passed a law allowing any inhabitant of the colony to borrow from the Provincial Library just established in Charleston. Twelve years later, noting heavy losses to the collection, the Assembly passed a new statute with provisions intended to mitigate the 'unrestrained Liberty" of the 1700 law. They appointed eminent trustees and erected elaborate checks and sanctions to prevent the loss of books, but these efforts were in vain, and books continued to be reported lost or stolen. Another cause of the library's neglect was the disapproval of some parts of the community who thought its Anglican bias was too marked. Whatever the reasons, the library melted away some time before 1724, when a local schoolmaster noted that there was no library in the town.[8] The problem with circulating libraries was that they tended to self-destruct gradually as borrowers read the books to pieces or simply failed to return them. A permanent reference collection was different from and incompatible with a circulating library.

The Library Company was the first public circulating library in the colonies that maintained a permanent collection. The subscription scheme was the means used to achieve permanence and sustainability. It worked because borrowers had a strong financial incentive to return books; otherwise shareholders forfeited their share and non-shareholders their cash deposit. (It also helped that the Librarian was held financially accountable for damage and losses.) The library was a hybrid of public and private, supported by private subscription but was also a chartered non-profit institution open to

[8] *The Laws of the Province of South Carolina*, Charleston, L. Timothy, 1736, 77, 207; James R. Raven, *London booksellers and American customers: transatlantic literary community and the Charleston Library Society, 1758-1811.*Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002, 34.

the public.[9] This hybrid was peculiarly suited to the American colonies, and it flourished. Libraries on the same principle soon appeared in other large towns, the Charleston Library Society, the New York Society Library; and three emulators in Philadelphia itself, the Association, Amicable, and Union Library Companies. They also appeared in 16 smaller towns in New England by 1760, rising to 51 towns by 1780.[10]

There is no clear English model for Franklin's subscription library scheme, though it bears some similarities to private book clubs like the 1710 Spalding Gentlemen's Society. The earliest so-called subscription library in England was Fancourt's in Salisbury, established some time in the 1730s; he moved it to London in 1742, where it was called a circulating library. It is not clear whether it was privately owned, but at least it was open to the paying public. When chartered subscription libraries more along American lines were introduced in England later in the eighteenth century they were not nearly so successful or widespread as commercial circulating libraries.[11]

Perhaps just because subscription libraries were so widespread in the colonies, commercial circulating libraries were slow to appear. In fact they were unknown until 1763, when more or less simultaneously they appeared in Annapolis, Charleston, and New York. The idea spread to Boston in 1765, Philadelphia in 1767, and Baltimore in 1773.[12] This sudden proliferation reflects the general expansion of reading and print

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[9] "*At the Instance of Benjamin Franklin": A Brief History of the Library Company of Philadelphia,* rev. and enl. ed., Philadelphia: The Library Company of Philadelphia, 1995, 5-11.
[10] Shera, *Foundations,* 55, 68.
[11] Paul Kaufman, *The Community Library: A Chapter in English Social History*, Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1967, 25, estimates the ratio of commercial to subscription libraries in 18th-century England at ten to one. Amory speculates that Franklin would have known about the circulating library Prince projected in 1726 ("A Boston Society Library," 3).
[12] David Kaser, *A Book for a Sixpence: The Circulating Library in America,* Pittsburgh, 1980, 19-43, noting several earlier instances of informal lending of books by booksellers. .

production that was taking place throughout the Atlantic world, and nowhere more rapidly than in America. Literacy rates were increasing steadily in the northern colonies, rising from 70% among white men in 1710 to 90% by 1790. Literacy rates among white women were lower when measured by the ability to write, but reading ability may have been much higher, especially in the cities. This meant not only more readers, but also a widening circle of readers, more women and more of middling economic status. The number of printers and printing centers was also increasing, and the quantity of print they produced more than doubled between 1740 and 1770. Imported books always made up the larger part of what colonial Americans read, however, and during that same period from 1740 to 1770 book imports increased more than tenfold in the middle colonies, with the rate of change accelerating in the 1760s.[13]

These changes may not have had much affect on the bulk of the population, but in cities such as Philadelphia or New York, the local book culture was becoming more and more like that of York or Bristol, or even of Dublin or Edinburgh. Booksellers for the first time became purveyors of fashion, as their contacts with British exporters became closer and the time lag between publication and reception in America dwindled to a matter of months. This is just another aspect of the rise of consumerism and the quest for refinement that historians see in all aspects of late colonial culture. It is also perhaps an aspect of the accelerating convergence of English and American culture and society that according to some historians preceded and to some extent brought on the Revolution. What it meant for the widening circle of urban readers was not only new kinds of reading material but

[13] James Raven, "The importation of books in the eighteenth century," James N. Green, "English books and printing in the age of Franklin," and Ross W. Beales and E. Jennifer Monaghan, "Literacy and schoolbooks," in Hugh Amory and David D. Hall, eds. *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* (A History

new reading practices and experiences; and circulating libraries were an important part of that.[14] Circulating libraries made it possible for readers of middling economic status to read a great many more books than ever before. Even the borrowing terms and fees encouraged them to read quickly and exchange their books often. Novels were perfectly suited to this type of reading, and thus the novel emerged in the 1760s as a type of book that was more often borrowed than owned, like videos today. The same can be said of plays. A few novels or plays in a circulating library's stock could quickly reach hundreds of readers, and create a fashion that could sweep through a small city such as Philadelphia like wildfire.

The very circumstances under which circulating libraries were introduced into colonial towns tell us something about how they affected subscription libraries and their readers. For example, the first circulating library in New York was established at just the moment when the city's subscription library was temporarily closed for business. In August 1763 New York's city hall closed for repairs, necessitating the closure of the subscription library housed there, the New York Society Library (established 1754). Days later bookseller Garrett Noel announced the opening of a circulating library. He saw the city hall renovation as a business opportunity, an opening in the market, and he leapt into it. By August 1765 the city hall repairs were complete and the library reopened, and

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of the Book in America, Vol.I), Cambridge University Press and the American Antiquarian Society, 2000, 183-193, 276-295,380.

[14] Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: persons, houses, cities.* New York: Knopf, 1992; Jack Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social development of early modern British colonies and the formation of American culture*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988; T.H. Breen, "'Baubles of Britain': The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 119 (1998), 73-104. James N. Green, "English Books," in Amory and Hall, *The Colonial Book*, 261ff.

on September 19th Noel placed his last newspaper advertisement, after which no more is heard of his library.[15]

In 1771 another attempt was made to launch a new library in New York, but this time it was a second subscription library, the Union Library Society. Its competitive advantage was that its shares were considerably cheaper. The day after the new library was announced to the public, the Society Library applied for a charter from the governor, an action that strongly suggests that it felt a threat of competition. The new library soon surpassed the old in number of subscribers, and so the old one found it prudent to reduce the price of its shares in 1772. In 1774 bookseller Samuel Loudon, sensing an expanding market for books and readers, opened a circulating library, the first since Garret Noel's closed nine years before. Three months later the Union Library Society moved in to City Hall to share quarters with its erstwhile competitor. Apparently there was room for two libraries in the marketplace of readers, but not yet three. [16]

The library environment in Philadelphia was even more complex, with several subscription libraries and several commercial ones in the years just before the Revolution. In 1763 after a long period of quiet prosperity, the Library Company entered a period of instability when Librarian Robert Greenway suddenly died. The Librarian was personally responsible for the collection, and upon stepping down from his post he was obliged to take inventory and replace any missing books at his own expense. Before Greenway the librarianship had turned over every year or two, so this was not a serious burden, but he had held the office for 17 years, during which time no inventory had been

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[15] Austin Baxter Keep, *History of the New York Society Library*, New York: De Vine Press, 1908, 78-106.
[16] Keep, op. cit., 115-116, and 108-110. By 1772 a share in the Society Library cost about 14 pounds (see note 20 below). The 1773 *Charter, and Bye-Laws* stated that new shares could be had for just 5 pounds if purchased before May 1774 (p.14). This remained the price until 1791 (Keep, 216).

taken. Now the required inventory revealed that "Books to a considerable value were missing." The deeply disturbed Directors attempted to seek restitution from Greenway's estate, apparently in vain.[17] Thus began a period of instability and change. For years to come librarians rash enough to take the job quit after their first annual inventory, despite ever increasing salary offers, rising from L6 annually to L60 by 1773.[18]

So disturbed were the Directors by their losses that they decided that henceforth only the Librarian would now be allowed access to the shelves, and that books would be brought to members in a space known as "outside the rails." (The Library was then in a room or rooms on the second floor of the west wing of Independence Hall.) When some members objected, a counterproposal was made that those who wished to have access to the shelves should sign a bond making them liable, along with the Librarian, for a share of any lost books. This sparked a formal member's protest. At a special meeting, the members made yet another proposal: drop the rule holding the Librarian accountable for the books, and exclude non-members from the Library altogether. All of these proposed changes were too radical for the Directors, and they stood their ground, decreeing that non-members and members alike were to be served outside the rails, and "No person except the Librarian is to be admitted into the Library."[19]

Even as access was eroding, the cost of a share had become prohibitive. The rise in library share prices has sometimes been considered by historians as an appreciation of their value or the result of some kind of speculation, but in fact it was a consequence of a little-understood practice of all the early subscription libraries in Philadelphia and New

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[17] Library Company of Philadelphia Directors' Minutes (hereafter LCP Minutes) I: 219, 21 November 1763; I: 225, 13 February 1764.
[18] Ibid., I: 86,10 May 1773.
[19] Ibid., I:226, 12 March 1764; I:230, 27 August 1764; I:233, 14 January 1765.

York: no new member could have a share for less than other members had already invested. Thus someone who bought a Library Company share in 1732 had to pay the original 40 shillings plus the ten shillings annual dues the first shareholders had paid in 1731, and so forth year by year. In effect the cost of a share rose automatically 10 shillings per year. Over the years three new subscription libraries had arisen in Philadelphia, each starting at around 40 shillings, each getting all the new shareholders, each with the same rule about equal investment, and each therefore gradually becoming more and more expensive. [20] As a result, only ten new shares had been issued in Greenway's 17 years, leading to an overall decline of revenue at just the moment when the Librarian's salary had to be raised and a sharp reduction in the rate of growth of the collection.[21] Though new shares were quite expensive, members were allowed to transfer shares to their heirs or sell them to any person approved by the Directors. Franklin boasted in the postscript to the 1741 *Catalogue* that "Shares so sold have always hitherto yielded as much as they had cost." [22] It seems reasonable to suppose that members who sold or auctioned their shares actually accepted something less than the cost of a new share; otherwise those who wanted shares would have simply bought them from the Directors. However, the library's Transfer Books do not record how much was paid for shares, so we cannot document this secondary market.

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[20] Keep, op. cit. 173 quotes the *New York Gazette*, 19 September 1765 with reference to the New York Society Library, "A share in the Library is now worth 10 l. 10 s." and goes on to note, "which quotation indicates increased market valuation." But that is simply the total of the original share cost (5 pounds in 1754) plus 11 years of dues at 10s. per year. The Association Library Company made this practice into a formal rule by setting the price of a new share at "such a sum of money as … will at the time of each subscription, render the subscriber's share of equal value with any of the rest." *A Catalogue of Books, belonging to the Association Library of Philadelphia,* Philadelphia, Printed by William Bradford, 1765, 4.
[21] Library Company of Philadelphia, Register of Shares.
[22] Library Company of Philadelphia, *Catalogue,* 1741, op. cit., [56].

When Lewis Nicola opened a circulating library in Philadelphia in 1767, it cost L21 to join the Library Company, plus the 10 shillings annual dues. By contrast, a year's subscription to Nicola's library cost $3 (later reduced to $2 or about 15 shillings). Readers could also subscribe for shorter periods, and undoubtedly most chose the lowest rate, six pence a week. Readers were allowed to take out only one book at a time, but the library was open six days a week, compared to one day a week at the Library Company, so an avid user of Nicola's library could exchange books daily and spend as little as a penny a book.[23]

Nicola expected to attract a broad demographic to his establishment. Women and young people were welcome, and they could choose their own books without the supervision of husband or father. For a year or two Nicola's library even shared space with a bonnet shop, a place women and girls felt comfortable entering, and a place devoted to their pleasure. At the Library Company only shareholders could borrow books, and though there was no rule prohibiting women from holding shares, at this point all shareholders were men.[24]

Another important difference between the two types of library was in the choice of books. The Library Company was a collection of worthy and approved titles, already aging as any permanent collection does. No catalogue of Nicola's library survives, but his advertisements mention a collection of 500 volumes, rising to over 1,000 by 1771,

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[23] Advertisements in *Pennsylvania Journal*, September 10, 1767, *Pennsylvania Gazette.* January 12, 1769, *Pennsylvania Packet,* December 23, 1771. Lewis Nicola (1717-1807) emigrated to Philadelphia from Ireland in 1766 and first operated a dry goods store, which may at first have shared quarters with his circulating library. For 9 months in 1769 he published *The American Magazine, or General Repository*, in which he published several papers presented at the American Philosophical Society, of which he was a curator. As an officer in the Revolutionary army he wrote a *Treatise of Military Exercise* (Philadelphia, 1776); see Robert F. Haggard, "The Nicola Affair: Lewis Nicola, George Washington, and American military discontent during the Revolutionary War," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 146:2 (June 2002):139-169.

and many new novels are mentioned by title. A taste for novel reading was developing belatedly but rapidly in the 1760s in the colonial seaboard towns, and Nicola catered to it, while the Library Company ignored this and other new kinds of light reading. Its 1764 catalogue listed over 1,000 books but only one English novel, *Tom Jones*.

In the late 1760s, in response to the challenge posed by Nicola's library and to complaints from members and the public, the Library took steps to improve access. In January 1768, the annual escalation of share prices was stopped and the price fixed at ten pounds. The minutes record the reasons for this decision:

> The Directors then took into consideration the high price of a share in the Library Company which now amounts to L21 and the inconveniences attending its continually encreasing. After mature deliberation, they unanimously agreed that it would be expedient to lower the Price of a Share to Ten Pounds and to fix it at that sum, by which means it was supposed many People would be induced to purchase in, and the annual income of the Company be considerably augmented.

Almost immediately 17 new members were enrolled, and in November an order for 55 new books was sent off to England, the first in a long time.[25]

This change made Library Company shares nearly the same price as those of the younger subscription libraries, which set the stage for a series of rapid mergers. By the middle of 1769 the Library Company had absorbed all the shareholders, books, and property of the other subscription libraries. As a result of this merger, the library doubled in size to over 2,000 titles, and the number of novels rose to a respectable 64. The number of shareholders tripled. One of the other libraries had a few women members, who by this merger automatically became members of the Library Company. No notice of this

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[24] *"At the Instance,"* 19-20.

[25] LCP Minutes, I:254, 11 January 1768; I:262, 1 November 1768. As noted above, the New York Society Library reduced its share prices in 1773.

change was taken in the minutes, but from then on a small but growing number of shareholders were women.

The consolidation of the subscription libraries made them more affordable to middle class readers, but it also opened a niche for a second commercial circulating library. It opened just a few weeks later, in September 1769, owned by 24-year-old Thomas Bradford, the youngest scion of an old printing and book selling family. It was not located in the family printing office, book store, and coffee house at Front and Market Streets, but rather in his house in a more residential neighborhood near 4th and Arch Streets. Nicola's library was at 3rd and Spruce Streets, in a different residential quarter, and the Library Company near 5th and Chestnut Streets was midway between them; so the three libraries were well-spaced in different quarters of town. We know more about Bradford's library than any other colonial circulating library, thanks to the survival of a ledger of circulation records for one year (1771-1772). From this I have been able to reconstruct a catalogue and some facts about the clientele. The contents of Bradford's library were dramatically different from those of the Library Company, and that apparently was his competitive strategy. The stock of 300 titles was 63% fiction, compared with less than 4% at the Library Company. Moreover the novels were for the most part new; three-quarters of them first appeared in the preceding decade.[26] Bradford was putting all his money on one type of book, betting that this new genre and would take

[26] This was a much higher proportion of fiction than can be found even in other commercial libraries where catalogs are extant. Kaser, *Book for a sixpence,* 173, analyzes those catalogs by subject and finds fiction accounting for 14% in John Mein's Boston catalog of 1765 and 24% in Aikman's 1773 Annapolis catalog. Note however than the total number of novels in Aikman's library, 205, actually exceeded Bradford's (195).

the city by storm, and it did: some 7,000 volumes circulated that year, fully 86% of them novels. [27]

In clientele, too, there was little overlap with the Library Company, since almost half of Bradford's borrowers were women.[28] The Bradford library was probably in his front parlor, and the actual manager appears to have been his wife Polly. In effect it was a shop, where you chose your book and took it away, but it was also part of a domestic space, and Mrs. Bradford may have welcomed customers and friends through the same door if not in the same room. The ledger shows that regular readers visited almost daily in the same groups; they were probably sociable with each other and with Mrs. Bradford. There was no public room at the Bradford Library where you could read comfortably and consult a variety of reference books, as there was at the Library Company. That difference accords with the different types of books in the two libraries and the different reading practices they involved. Bradford's library had no reference books, and the novels, plays, and light verse that made up almost the entire collection were meant to be read in domestic spaces and for pleasure.

In September 1769, just four days after Bradford opened his circulating library, the Directors of the newly consolidated Library Company adopted a new set of rules, which made the subscription library more effective as a circulating library than ever. Opening hours were extended from one to three days a week (Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturdays, four hours each afternoon), and for the first time since 1764 members were

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[27] By comparison, in the subscription library in Bristol, England belles lettres accounted for 25% of the borrowing and 26% of the holdings. John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*,New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997, 181.

[28] Thomas Bradford, Library Register, 1771-1772, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, collection no. 70. By comparison at Marshall's Circulating Library in Bath, England, 35% of readers were women in 1793, and 22% in 1798. Brewer, *Pleasures,* 179.

permitted within the rails. (Non-members still had to be waited on outside.) Also the loan period was extended and the number of books members could borrow at one time was increased.[29]

The borrowing fees paid by non-members were left unchanged at 4 to 8 pence per volume per week, which was competitive with Bradford's and Nicola's charge of 6 pence per week, but the difference of course was that at the commercial libraries books could be changed daily. Now that the Library Company was to be open 3 days a week, books could be exchanged more often, and the question naturally arose, should the charges be lower if the book was kept out a shorter period of time. The Directors' answer was no, and to the table of charges they added for the first time this qualification: "no smaller sums, altho' the book or books should be return'd within the week."[30] The addition of this clause shows how aware the Library Company was of the terms offered by the commercial libraries.

Another indication that readers were asking for the same privileges they enjoyed at the commercial libraries is recorded in the minutes. Evidently the Librarian had begun in some cases to waive the requirement that borrowers who were not members leave a cash deposit of double the book's value. This came to the Directors' attention in 1772, and they noted, "It being represented to the Board that a practice hath been introduced of letting out Books on Hire without Deposits, notwithstanding the Rule to the contrary; the Librarian is enjoined to observe the said Rule strictly for the future." [31]

In 1770 another change in the rules extended borrowing privileges to members of shareholders' families. The minutes record that

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[29] LCP Minutes, II:22, 25 September 1769
[30] LCP Minutes, II:22, 25 September 1769

> Some Complaints having been made that the Rules of the Library, with Respect to preventing Members sons & others from having access to the Books, are too strict. It is agreed that any Person approved of by the Directors & having an Order from a Member shall be admitted within the Rails in the same Manner as a Member. [32]

Presumably any family member or servant could still take out books specifically requested in writing by a shareholder, but now "sons & others" could browse the shelves and choose their own books. It is not clear whether wives and daughters might be included under the rubric of "others."

In 1773 the Library Company moved to much larger quarters in Carpenter's Hall and once again extended its hours: now it was open daily 2 to 7. New bookshelves were ordered with locked hinged doors covered with wire mesh, so that non-members could be admitted into the library proper and could browse the spine titles of the books, and the Librarian could open or close each bay of shelves at his discretion. A visitor from Massachusetts described the room:

> Soon after dinner, the bell of the Church near Carpenter's Hall rang, which informed us that the Library of the Hall was open, for the purpose of receiving and delivering books. We immediately repaired to it ... Every modern author of any note, I am told, is to be met with here, and large additions are annually made. The books appeared to be well arranged and in good order. But the number of books, and the arrangement, are not so large nor so ornamental as the library at Cambridge, but approaches nearer to it than any other on the continent. I was pleased with a kind of network doors to the book-shelves, which is made of a large wire sufficiently open to read the labels, but no book can be taken out unless the librarian unlocks the door. This is a necessary security from any persons taking books without the knowledge of the librarian. Here were a large number of gentlemen. I was introduced to a number of the members of the Philosophical Society…[33]

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[31] LCP Minutes II:78, 28 December 1772.

[32] LCP Minutes, II:36, 5 February 1770

[33]William Parker Cutler, Life, journals and correspondence of Rev. Manasseh Cutler, Cincinnati: R. Clarke, 1888, I:282-3. Cutler made his visit during the Constitutional Convention of 1787, when the Library Company opened its doors to all the delegates, so his description may reflect a state occasion.

The Library Company had changed enormously since librarian Greenway's death, but with its imposing architecture and illustrious clientele, it was still quite different from Tom and Polly Bradford's living room.

Not long after the Library Company moved in 1772, both Nicola's and Bradford's libraries closed. [34] Apparently the older library's responses to the challenges posed by commercial libraries were effective, but there are signs that the Bradford library was past its peak even before then. The circulation ledger for 1771-72 shows that hardly any new books were added to his library in the course of that year, thereby destroying the main advantage he had over the Library Company, risking the loss of his most faithful customers, and generally undercutting his basic business strategy.

At least one entrepreneur, however, thought there was room in Philadelphia for a commercial library if conducted with panache. In 1774 a new circulating library was opened by Robert Bell, a recent immigrant with long experience as a bookseller in Scotland and Ireland and already famous as a flamboyant auctioneer. Bell occupied the building that had housed the old Union Library Company before it merged with the Library Company; thus he was literally filling a vacant niche in the local library system. Bell brought the sophistication of the British Isles to his establishment, and it became a gathering place for all kinds of writers and public figures.[35] Bell's library, however, turned out to be vulnerable precisely because it was so popular. It became the haunt of British officers during their occupation of Philadelphia in 1777 and 1778; after their evacuation it fell out of favor and was moribund when he died in 1784.

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[34] The precise dates of their closure can not be determined. Bradford's last advertisement appeared in the *Pennsylvania Journal* June 23, 1773 ("All persons who have any Books belonging to the Circulating Library in Second-street, are desired to return them immediately.") and according to Haggard, "The Nicola Affair," Nicola moved with his family to Allentown, Pennsylvania "in the early 1770s."

We will never know whether subscription libraries in Philadelphia and New York would have succeeded in luring readers away from circulating libraries or preventing their members from defecting, because the Revolution killed off the colonial commercial libraries, in those two cities and everywhere else. Purely commercial libraries turned out to be highly vulnerable to the economic instability of the 1780s and early 1790s. Thus the subscription libraries were left in possession of the field after the war, stronger and more popular than ever. The changes that had been made to the Library Company in the 1760s continued to erase many of the advantages of the commercial libraries. In 1783, as soon as the smoke of war had cleared, William Prichard opened a circulating library in Philadelphia, but the post-war depression killed it off in 1788. Not until well into the 1790s did other libraries arise to compete with the Library Company. Now commonly known as the City Library or the Public Library, it was more of a public institution than ever.

The New York Society Library survived revolution and occupation more or less intact, and in the postwar years only one significant circulating library arose to compete with it. John Fellows' Circulating Library started business in 1793 and was taken over and greatly expanded by Hocquet Caritat in 1797.[36] By 1800 Caritat had a library of over 3,000 volumes and a stock of books for sale or rent of over 30,000 volumes. His 1804 catalogue included almost 2,000 novels. That was certainly competition for the New York Society Library, which owned only a bit more than 2500 titles in all. This rapid expansion, however, left the Caritat library vulnerable to the usual business risks. In

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[35] James Green, "English books," in Amory and Hall, *The Colonial Book,* 283-291

[36] Cf. the list of libraries in Kaser, *Book for a Sixpence,* 127-163. The only other New York library of the 1790s listed there is Aarondt Van Hook's Reading Room, which advertised a small "standing library."

1804 returned to his native France and sold the business to publisher Isaac Riley, whose bankruptcy shortly thereafter put an end to the largest American library of its time. [37]

In both Philadelphia and New York, the two cities where commercial and subscription libraries were in dynamic relationship, the advantages enjoyed by the commercial libraries were many. They offered more new books, more light reading, longer opening hours, lower costs to borrowers, convenient location, and access for women and young people. Subscription libraries tried to emulate commercial libraries in each of those areas, but because of the need to maintain and preserve permanent reference collections, they could not go nearly as far in making their collections accessible to all. On the other hand, the weakness of commercial libraries was their very impermanence, their structural inability to renew their collections or sustain themselves for more than a few years in a period when all commercial enterprises were precarious and economic downturns were frequent. Even this weakness, however, implied a kind of strength: it was easy for any bookseller with a substantial stock to start up a new commercial library and make a go of it for at least a few years. Thus in both cities, no commercial library lasted more than a few years, but new ones kept popping up. Meanwhile the subscription libraries had to consolidate and become more like commercial libraries, but they endured. Moreover, in both cases they were able to function effectively as their cities' de facto public libraries until the mid-19th century even though they remained private institutions, precisely because the competition with commercial libraries had made them more accessible to people of moderate income, to

[37] George Gates Raddin, Jr., *Hocquet Caritat and the Early New York Literary Scene,* Dover, N.J.: Dover Advance Press, 1953, p.30-34. For the holdings of the New York Society Library, see Robert Winans, *Descriptive checklist of book catalogues separately printed in America, 1693-1800,* Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1981, items 179 and 281.

women and children, and to the growing number of readers who read not only to become learned, virtuous, or polite, but also to have fun.