THE FOUNDING OF SOCIAL LIBRARIES IN PENNSYLVANIA, 1731-1876

By HAYNES McMULLEN*

WHEN Benjamin Franklin, in the year 1731, persuaded his fellow members in the Junto Club that a new kind of organization was necessary if they were to obtain reading matter economically and conveniently, he and his friends founded the first of hundreds of social libraries which were to be born and (most of them) to die in the next hundred and fifty years in America. The Junto's library, which soon became the Library Company of Philadelphia, was preceded by a few similar libraries in England and was followed within two years by another social library in Durham, Connecticut, so no one knows with certainty whether Franklin's library was, as he claimed, the "mother of all the North American subscription libraries." Some of them could have descended directly from English or New England mothers, but large numbers of them acknowledged Franklin's Library Company as their ancestress and tried to emulate her.

It was in Philadelphia, too, that another major event in American library history occurred, this time in the rooms of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, in 1876, when a small group of men founded the American Library Association. This association was destined to provide a focus for a movement which was already gathering momentum, a movement away from the social library and toward the free public library. Of course the social libraries did not all die in 1876—some are still alive today—but that date will do as well as any to mark the beginning of their decline. It has been used often enough to define the beginning of

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1Franklin made this claim in his autobiography: The Life of Benjamin Franklin, written by himself, ed. by John Bigelow. 2nd ed. (1881), I, 208. It is critically examined in Jesse Shera's The Foundations of the Public Library; the Origins of the Public Library Movement in New England, 1629-1855 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), pp. 54-57.
the modern movement in America with its emphasis on other kinds of libraries.

Much is known about a few of the fine collections which flourished in Philadelphia between 1731 and 1876, and the history of several established elsewhere in Pennsylvania has been studied in some detail, but no one has tried to gather information on as many as possible of the social libraries founded in the entire state and to look at them in relation to other parts of the life of the state. The present article is an attempt to do these things.

The term "social library" needs some attention because, while writers agree that certain libraries were "social," they disagree as to whether others come within the meaning of the word. Strictly speaking, a social library is one formed by an association of people who band together in order to provide themselves with books of a general or miscellaneous nature. But broadly speaking, the term has also been used for a library owned by people who have other purposes as well (perhaps holding a lecture series), or for a collection owned by one group for the benefit of another (as when businessmen supported and directed an apprentices' library), or for an association formed to buy books of a specialized nature (as when a social law library was organized). In this article, a compromise definition will be used: Any collection of general or miscellaneous books will be included if it was administered by an organization, one of whose main purposes was the operation of a library for its members or for other people. This definition permits the inclusion of such general collections as those in mechanics', apprentices', and mercantile libraries, even though their financial support came largely from groups which did not use them heavily. It also embraces some fairly general collections established by religious groups if use by the public was encouraged. On the other hand, this definition excludes libraries which were specialized in subject matter, such as those belonging to historical, scientific, or medical societies and collections belonging to religious organizations if the books were mainly religious in nature. It excludes all libraries owned by schools, colleges, or by societies of students.

Even with these exclusions the total of almost two hundred social libraries which existed in Pennsylvania before 1876 attests the eagerness of its citizens to acquire and use the information
and recreation available to them in books. The phrase “almost two hundred” is intentionally vague. Information about early libraries is widely scattered, and the amount of information on each library varies from the detailed monographs on a few Philadelphia libraries to the statement in an early guidebook that some small town had “two schools, three churches, a library, and a gristmill.” The present article is based on a careful search of all national lists of libraries published before 1876, of all acts of the General Assembly of Pennsylvania for charters granted to libraries, and all promising publications listed in *Writings on American History* and several bibliographies on Pennsylvania history. A less complete search has been made of county histories and early city directories, almanacs, and travel accounts. Libraries in several Pennsylvania towns have been helpful in locating information.

This search has turned up 173 social libraries for which a definite place and date of founding can be established and 19 others for which the date or (very rarely) the town could not be determined. It is likely that even more existed; however, the present study is based on the 173 libraries for which definite information is available, on the assumption that they are representative.

A word should be said about the emphasis on the founding of libraries. This is necessary for two reasons: First, because the typical American social library was short-lived: therefore, for the most part, periods and places where libraries were being founded were periods and places where there was library activity. When founding ceased, interest in libraries was usually declining. Second, much more information has been recorded about the births of many libraries than about their lives, their last illnesses, or their deaths. Sometimes, for the most obscure, the only proofs of their existence were facts about their founding.

**The Antecedents of the Social Libraries**

The library which the Junto members gathered was not the first collection in America, not even the first in Pennsylvania, which was designed to serve the needs of a group of people. A collection of books had been part of the cargo of a ship which came to Salem, in New England, in 1629, though no one knows what happened to the books after they were unloaded. Several New
England towns owned small collections before 1700, but there is no evidence that the reading of these books contributed to the cultural life of that region. The only town library which seems to have been in existence in the days of Franklin's Junto, the one at Boston, was to be lost in a fire in 1747 and not replaced for a hundred years.  

One organized effort to establish a group of libraries had already been made in the colonies before Franklin and his friends established the first social library. The Rev. Dr. Thomas Bray, a very diligent Anglican clergyman, had directed a movement in the 1690's and early 1700's to send libraries to parishes, mainly in Maryland, but also in other Southern colonies. These libraries were intended for clergymen but were used to some extent by laymen and were not confined to religious books.  

A few of the books distributed by Bray and his Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts found their way into Pennsylvania. When the Rev. Mr. Clayton came to Christ Church in Philadelphia in 1695 he brought a collection of books with him, and a donation of more than three hundred volumes was received from the society, apparently in the year 1700. Not all of these books were on religion; other gifts raised the total to around five hundred by the time the Junto collected a library. The Christ Church collection circulated, so it surely must have been used by laymen as well as the clergy. At almost exactly the same time that this library was being formed, three meetings of the Society of Friends were forming another. The Weekly Meetings of Radnor, Haverford, and Merion were sharing a few books before they pooled their funds to buy twenty-five more books in the year 1700.  

These antecedent churchly collections were not widely imitated by other religious groups, and there is no proof that they influenced Franklin and his friends. The story of the founding of the libraries is described in William D. Houlette's "Parish Libraries and the Work of the Reverend Thomas Bray," The Library Quarterly, IV (1934), 588-609. S. Potter, "Notes on a Couple of Very Early Church Labels of Pennsylvania," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography (PMHB), XLV (1921), 295-296. Thomas Allen Glenn, Merion in the Welsh Tract (Norristown, 1896), p. 372.
Library Company has been told over and over, with no reference to any earlier models, so we may assume that it was an original enterprise.

**SOCIAL LIBRARIES BEFORE THE REVOLUTION**

The story of the twelve social libraries of colonial Pennsylvania has been well told by E. V. Lamberton, and separate monographs have been written about several of them. They will be only briefly reviewed here.

The Library Company of Philadelphia was by far the finest and most famous social library in the colony. At the end of the Revolutionary War, it held what was then considered a very large collection, about five thousand volumes, and held, as well, a place of high esteem in the intellectual life of the city.

Ten years after the Library Company was established, a bequest of 111 books to the Monthly Meeting of Friends in Philadelphia laid the foundation for a library which continued well into the twentieth century but which was too specialized in content and in clientele to qualify as a social library within the definition used in the present study. As late as the 1850's, a person who was not a Friend could use it only if he were a “sober, religious inquirer after truth,” and applied to a committee, presenting a satisfactory reference. During most of its life it was known as “the Library of the Four Monthly Meetings of Friends.”

The next library in the state was also founded by Friends, at Darby, but seems to have been a true social library. In 1743, twenty-nine men signed articles of agreement, and books were purchased the same year. The collection remained small; in 1761 there were 230 volumes, and after the Revolution there were still few enough to be kept in a chest in the librarian’s home.

The third truly social library was established at Germantown

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8 One of the fullest accounts of the library is Austin K. Gray's *Benjamin Franklin's Library* (New York: Macmillan, 1937).
in 1745 and may not have survived the Revolution; the last newspaper notice which clearly refers to it appeared in 1771. Almost nothing is known about its founding, its size, or its services.\textsuperscript{11}

Much more is known about Philadelphia's second social library, the Union Library, formed in 1747. It was prosperous enough to issue a printed catalog in 1754 and again in 1765, but merged with the stronger Library Company of Philadelphia in 1769, giving up its identity in the merger.\textsuperscript{12}

The next library had the same name but was founded outside of Philadelphia; the Union Library of Hatboro was organized in 1755 and received its first books from England the next year. If we are to take its articles of agreement seriously, its founding was an emergency measure: "Whereas Black and Dark Ignorance with all the Horrid Concomitants that Generally Accompany or flow from it, did about this time greatly prevail in these parts. . . ."\textsuperscript{13} The venture was successful and its second printed catalog, issued in 1788, listed 382 titles in a greater number of volumes.\textsuperscript{14}

Philadelphia's third and fourth organizations, the Association Library and the Amicable Library, were started in 1757, apparently within a week of each other. The Amicable gave up its name and merged its collection with Philadelphia's Union Library in 1766. The Association Library held out longer; its printed catalog of 1765 listed 570 titles but it, too, was absorbed by the Union Library in 1769.\textsuperscript{15}

One of the most famous and prosperous of the libraries outside of Philadelphia was the next in order of founding, the Lancaster Library Company of 1759. By a stroke of genius, in 1763 it renamed itself the Juliana Library Company in honor of the wife of William Penn, Junior, thus acquiring a distinctive name and a generous patroness. Shortly before the Revolution it had about 700 volumes.\textsuperscript{16}

The next library association followed the next year, when the

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., pp. 195-207.
\textsuperscript{13} Quoted by Chester T. Hallenbeck in "A Colonial Reading List from the Union Library of Hatboro, Pennsylvania," \textit{PMHB}, LV1 (1932), 290.
Newtown Library was founded by twenty-one members with a collection of thirty-five volumes. By the time of the Revolution it had acquired 154 titles in 524 volumes. It had the distinction of being publicly accused of contributing to the downfall of a young woman. Edward Hicks, a prominent member of the Society of Friends, told in his memoirs how the daughter of his foster parents read its novels, acquired romantic notions, married a worthless “Presbyterian Doctor” and later obtained a divorce from him. Most of the contents of these early libraries, however, seem to have been solid, indeed elevating. The 8,000 volumes in the Philadelphia Library Company’s collection, some years after the end of the colonial period, contained only 81 titles classified as “Fiction, Wit and Humor.”

Very little is known about the next two libraries. In 1762, the Blockley and Merion United Library Company was choosing its officers; all trace is lost after 1773, so it may never have revived after the war. The first minutes of the Reading Library, written in 1764, indicate that it existed as early as 1763. A later Reading Library, formed in 1808, had some of the same members as this earlier one, so it may have had some connection with it.

During the twenty years, between the founding of the Reading Library and the outbreak of the Revolution, there seem to be records of only one new organization, the Library Company of Chester, founded in 1769. It continued, with some interruptions of service, until the 1870’s.

During the colonial period, then, Pennsylvania had twelve libraries which clearly should be considered as social libraries. Was this a good record? Did the state hold the lead which Franklin gave it? These questions cannot be completely answered, because details are not known about all of the social libraries in the colonies. But information about the New England ones has been tabulated: Connecticut was a veritable hotbed for libraries, with a total of twenty-six before 1781; Massachusetts was next with


Ibid., pp. 232-233.


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sixteen, and the rest of New England produced nine altogether. Pennsylvania's record during colonial days is perhaps consistent with the attitude of its people towards books and reading. Its people had a solid respect for the printed word, but kept their enthusiasm for acquiring and using books within bounds. By the time of the Revolution, the state still had several large religious groups who felt that considerable discretion must be used in selecting reading matter.

QUIET YEARS FROM THE REVOLUTION TO 1830

The years from the Revolution to about 1830 were a time of steady but unspectacular library activity in the state; however, there were some variations from decade to decade in the rate at which new libraries were being founded. There is no clear proof of the establishment of any social libraries during the 1770's or the 1780's before 1788, when a library was started at what was then Richland but is now Quakertown in Bucks County. The Richland Library received a charter in 1795 and continued to exist for many years.

Table 1 shows that of the twelve libraries founded in the decade, 1791-1800, all but one were in the southeastern corner of the state. The one exception, the Fredericktown Library, was in operation from 1796 to 1825 in that western center of intellectual life, Washington County. Concerning one in Lancaster, there is some dispute. It may have been virtually a continuation of the earlier Juliana Library, but there is some evidence that the "Library Company of Lancaster" was really founded in 1796. In Philadelphia County, one was at Byberry (not yet a part of the city), and the only one in Philadelphia proper was one which barely qualifies as a social library, the Mosheimische Gesellschaft collection, established in 1792 by a society of young men who had organized themselves together years earlier to preserve an interest in the German language.

22 Shera, Foundations of the Public Library, p. 55.
The concentration of libraries in the densely populated southeastern corner of the state is to be expected, but the absence of any new English-language social libraries in Philadelphia is surprising. These were the years when the city, as the capital of the new nation, was the center of attention, with a concentration of intellectual, social, and political activity, ahead of Boston in the volume of its business activity and not yet surpassed by New York. It must have been that the large and well established Library Company of Philadelphia was meeting the needs of serious readers. During the decade it took under its wing the Loganian Library, a specialized collection strong in science and classical literature. Several other excellent special collections had survived the war, notably the scientific library of the American Philosophical Society, founded in 1742, and the books on building started by the Carpenters' Company in 1736. For the religiously inclined, the Library of the Four Monthly Meetings of Friends, or the Library at Christ Church were still in existence. People with lighter tastes could patronize any of several commercial circulating libraries.

In the years from 1801 through 1810, the steady but slow ap-
peaceful period of new social libraries in southeastern Pennsylvania continued. Even though no social libraries appeared in western Pennsylvania, a commercial circulating library had been established in Pittsburgh around 1798; and Zadok Cramer, the leading printer and publisher in that city, opened another in 1801 and maintained it until 1814. In Philadelphia, no new social library was founded, and the only new special library of any importance was the one established by the Law Association in 1802.

In the decade beginning with 1811, the rate of founding was about the same but the geographical pattern was somewhat different. Eleven libraries were founded, but only five of them in smaller towns of the southeastern area. In this second decade of the century, the western part of the state began to show more interest in libraries. A library association was formed at Meadville in 1812; the optimistically named Pittsburgh Permanent Library Company was organized during the winter of 1813-1814; and the Washington Library Company opened its doors in 1816. Apparently none of these western libraries lasted more than a few years, but two of the three libraries started in Philadelphia during this decade are still living and the third lasted more than a century. The Athenaeum Library was the result of planning by a few young men who opened it in 1814. It grew steadily, acquiring 3,300 volumes within ten years, and growing to 20,000 volumes by 1875. Another Philadelphia library with a general collection, whose growth paralleled that of the Athenaeum, was the Apprentices' Library, opened to boys in 1820 and to girls as well in 1841. By 1870 it had removed all restrictions and had become the first free circulating library in the city, open to everyone.

The third Philadelphia library, opened in 1817 by the German Society of Pennsylvania, probably qualified as a social library because it was open to people who were not members of the society if they paid an annual fee. It contained a general collection in both German and English.

In the 1820's, the rate of founding of libraries continued at a

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surprisingly steady pace; again, eleven libraries were founded which seem to fit the definition of social libraries. The only one of these in Philadelphia, and the one that was to become the most famous, was the Mercantile, organized in 1821 and opened in 1822 for the benefit of young clerks in business houses. After early struggles it began to grow rapidly in the 1860's and by 1875 had almost 130,000 volumes, a size which put it sixth from the top of all libraries in the entire country. Just outside of Philadelphia, two libraries, the Southwark Library of 1822 and the Library and Reading Room Company of the Northern Liberties, started in 1830, were so close that their areas became part of the city in the 1850's.

The very steady rate of founding of libraries between 1790 and 1830 is difficult to explain, because most of what is known about trends in the pattern of founding of libraries in other states would indicate that economic conditions should have caused more fluctuations. Reduced business activity during the War of 1812, in the depression around the year 1820, and in the sluggish years following should have caused the rate of founding to drop. However, none of these economic changes were so severe as ones to come later, and the agricultural areas outside of Philadelphia and its environs were not so directly affected by business trends. Also, in the founding of a total of forty-four libraries over a period of forty years, chance plays a large part. If five or ten libraries per year had been founded, it would be much easier to speak with confidence about trends.

Comparison with other states is difficult, but there is some basis for the comparison of Philadelphia with other cities during the 1820's. James E. DeKay, a physician and naturalist, in a footnote to a lecture delivered at the Lyceum of Natural History in New York City in 1826, compared the population with the number of "public" libraries in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore and the number of volumes in those libraries. The term "public" ordinarily meant any library not owned by an individual, so included social libraries, college libraries, and society libraries.

His figures give .92 volumes per capita in Boston, .44 in Philadelphia, .43 in Baltimore, and .21 in New York. In total number of volumes, Philadelphia was ahead of the others with 70,000; Boston had 55,000; New York, 44,000, and Baltimore, 30,000.  

**Increased Activity, 1830-1875**

There can be no doubt about the upward trend in the establishment of social libraries in Pennsylvania, beginning in the 1830's; and what dips there are in the upward moving line are easily understood. The twenty libraries founded in the 1830's show a slightly wider geographic scattering than before; five of them were in the West, and, for the first time, two were in the East but north of Blue Mountain, one of them at Stroudsburg and the other at Wilkes-Barre. None had yet appeared in the central mountainous area.

These libraries founded in the 1830's were mostly traditional library companies, but a few were established for young men, and two in Philadelphia were founded under religious auspices. The first two lyceums appeared in the thirties, the Lancaster Lyceum or Conservatory of Arts and Sciences founded around 1836 or 1837, and the Jenkins Town Lyceum, founded in 1838. The lyceums, as promoted in this country by Josiah Holbrook beginning in the later 1820's, were intended mainly as organizations to provide for discussion and to establish lecture series; they often owned libraries. However, in many the library function predominated, so they often operated just like library associations, particularly in the years from the 1830's to the Civil War, when many of the library associations also presented lecture series or entertainments in order to obtain money to buy books. In the present study, lyceums are included if they are known to have had libraries.

The small number of social libraries founded in the 1840's may be due to the long depression after the Panic of 1837 and the lesser Panic of 1841, a depression more noticeable in Pennsylvania than in New England. It is possible that the large number (seven) in the year 1850 marked the general increase in prosperity after

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the 1849 Gold Rush; however, it is unwise to attach importance to the number of foundings in any single year because 1839, quite unaccountably, also stood out with a total of seven. In the decade of the 1840's there was a noticeable increase in libraries intended for limited groups; each of twelve out of the sixteen was either established for mechanics, for young people in general, or had some religious or foreign language affiliation.

One small undertaking of the 1840's, in a suburb of Pittsburgh, became in one respect the most influential library in the world, because it was in the Anderson Library, in Allegheny, that Andrew Carnegie read as a boy. As a direct result of his use of this collection he was to become the most generous friend that libraries have ever had.

In the 1850's, more libraries were founded than ever before, with the majority still in southeastern Pennsylvania. Several of the libraries in Philadelphia and its suburbs were clearly established for the benefit of young men and possibly to help combat crime in the outlying parts of the metropolis, a serious problem in the early 1850's.

In the 1860's, the war, of course, affected library use adversely. Small and weak libraries ceased to function, though some of them revived after the war. A few strong ones, such as the Library Company of Philadelphia, were little affected. Very few were born during the war years: only one in 1861, none in 1862, two in 1863, none in 1864, and three in 1865. But after the war, founding resumed so quickly that the total for the decade rose to twenty-three. Table 1 shows that the Pennsylvania library map of the 1860's was sharply different from maps for earlier decades; less than a third of the new libraries were in the Southeast; the rest were scattered evenly through the other parts of the state.

The main difference in the pattern of library establishment in the 1870's was a rapid increase in the number founded, twenty-seven in the years 1871 through 1875. If the ten-year period from 1865 through 1874 is compared with pre-war decades, this increase in library activity is even more obvious: forty-six new libraries as compared with thirty in the most prolific pre-war decade, the 1850's. Clearly, the idea of the social library was not yet dead. Geographically, the pattern of the 1860's continued into the 1870's: four libraries in Philadelphia and the rest scattered quite evenly over the state.
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Two kinds of libraries which began to appear by the time of the Civil War are not included in the present study although they had purposes quite similar to those of the social libraries: the Young Men's Christian Association libraries which sprang up all over the United States as the YMCA movement swept the country in the 1850's, and the free public government-supported libraries which spread more slowly during the same years.

In Pennsylvania, at least fifteen YMCA libraries began operation during the 1850's, mainly in larger towns. Several of these must have died at the time of the Civil War, because only two of them were listed in the United States Bureau of Education's directory of libraries published in 1876.30

At least three libraries founded in small towns in Pennsylvania during the 1870's were free public libraries by the year 1876; and two large Philadelphia libraries, the Apprentices' Library and the Friends' Free Library of Germantown, were open without charge to everyone by that time.31 There were other slight indications of the acceptance of the idea of public support for libraries. For example, the General Assembly had passed a law in 1855 permitting the Allegheny City Councils to take over the operation of the Anderson Library, and another law in 1871 directed that in the future the dog taxes in Lock Haven were to go to the Lock Haven Library Association rather than the sheep fund.32 But the idea of the public library had, all in all, made little progress in Pennsylvania before 1876.33

THE FOUNDING OF LIBRARIES AND THE DENSITY OF POPULATION

In general, social libraries are more likely to be founded where population is denser, because such libraries can serve people better if they live within easy visiting distance. But what more can be said about the relationship between density of population and the founding of these libraries? How many libraries were city libraries, how many in smaller places? Was the pattern any dif-

31 Ibid., pp. 1116-1124, passim.
ferent in cities from rural areas? And as population became denser in any area, was there any point at which libraries began to form—that is, any "critical density" which was necessary for their formation?

Philadelphia was the one large city in the state during all of these years, never seriously challenged by any other town. Of the total of one hundred and seventy-three libraries founded before 1876, thirty were in Philadelphia and fourteen more were in towns which became part of the city during the period. Eight of the fourteen were founded within ten years before their towns were taken in, so it may be appropriate to think of this group of forty-four libraries as in urban areas. These make up almost exactly one-fourth of the libraries being studied.

In Philadelphia and its suburbs, the four strongest libraries were established early. The Library Company, founded in 1731, had 104,000 volumes in 1875, the Athenaeum of 1813 had 20,000, the Apprentices' Library, 1820, had 21,000, and the Mercantile, 1821, had 126,000. But the largest number of libraries was founded late. When the Mercantile was founded, only one-third of the libraries in the Philadelphia area had been established; half of the libraries in the area were founded between 1850 and 1875. Several of these later libraries, as we have seen, were specialized, either intended for people in a particular district, for certain groups (such as young men), or sponsored by religious or charitable organizations.

Outside of Philadelphia and its suburbs, there was no great concentration of libraries in any single town. Lancaster and Reading each had nine, Pittsburgh eight, Washington four, Harrisburg three; and no other town had more than two. The libraries in these five towns, together with the libraries in or near Philadelphia, made up forty-five per cent of the total in the state. To put it another way, more than half of the libraries were scattered in towns where there were only one or two libraries during the entire period.

We have already seen how the libraries clustered mainly in southeastern Pennsylvania until about 1810, then began to appear in some number in western counties, and after the Civil War were appearing fairly evenly over the state. This pattern shows that new libraries were not confined to thinly populated places, but we can
By using the maps prepared by the United States Bureau of the Census which show the density of population in all parts of the country at ten-year intervals beginning with 1790. By using these maps, it is possible to determine the approximate density of population at the time and place of founding of each library. For libraries which were founded in other than decennial years the density may have been lower in the decennial year just before the date of founding and higher in the decennial year following. Since it is impossible to be sure of the density in the year when such a library was established, the only safe procedure is to draw one set of conclusions based on the assumption that for all libraries the density was that of the earlier decennial year and another set of conclusions based on the possibility that the density was that of the later decennial year. Any conclusions which can be based on both assumptions may be accepted.

The population density maps of the Bureau of the Census show the density in these six classes: under two inhabitants per square mile; two to six inhabitants per square mile; six to eighteen; eighteen to forty-five; forty-five to ninety; and ninety and over. These classes have more meaning if they are related to the density of population in the 1960 census: Alaska was the only state in 1960 with fewer than two inhabitants per square mile; a few Rocky Mountain states had from two to six inhabitants per square mile; other Rocky Mountain or western plains states were in the six-to-eighteen class, but such states as Nebraska and Oregon were in the eighteen-to-forty-five class. A few Midwestern states and several Southern states were in the forty-five-to-ninety class, but a few of the more populous Southern states, as well as most of the North Central and all of the East Coast states from Massachusetts through North Carolina were above ninety; Pennsylvania had 251 inhabitants per square mile.

In the years before 1876, Pennsylvania was among the more densely populated states, but there were marked differences in density in different parts of the state. At the time of the first census in 1790 a small area around Philadelphia was one of the few spots in the country where population was already above

34 These may have been conveniently reproduced in Charles O. Paullin's A Wit of the Historical Geography of the United States, ed. by John K. Wright (Washington: Carnegie Institution of Washington, Publication No. 401, 1932), plates 76B through 79D.
ninety inhabitants per square mile; throughout the period, the southeastern quarter of the state was more densely populated than any other part. The southwestern area, centering around Pittsburgh was, also from 1790 on, the second most densely settled area. The north central part was the slowest to fill up; a tiny area there still had fewer than two inhabitants per square mile in 1840, a date when all of Ohio and Kentucky had passed beyond this class.

The figures in Table 2 are in general agreement with the findings about the concentration of libraries in individual towns. Reading the line which begins "Under 2," we find that no matter whether the population density at the decennial date before the date of founding of libraries is used or whether the decennial date after the date of founding is used, there were no libraries founded in areas with fewer than two inhabitants per square mile. The last

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line before the line for totals shows that if we consider the density at the census year before the date of founding, seventy-two out of the total of one hundred and sixty-five, or forty-five per cent, of the libraries were founded in areas having more than ninety inhabitants per square mile; and if we consider the density as being that of the next census year after the year of founding of the library, then eighty-one, or almost fifty-one per cent, were founded in this highest density class.
Even if the thirty-nine libraries in Philadelphia and its suburbs (all of them in the "90 and over" class) are removed from the calculations, there is a marked tendency for libraries to have been formed in more densely populated areas. Considering the census year before the year of founding for each library, there are still only eight out of one hundred and twenty-one which were founded in areas having fewer than eighteen inhabitants per square mile—and even fewer if we consider the decennial year after the date of founding.

This tendency of Pennsylvanians to wait to found libraries until the density of population had reached at least eighteen people was not shared by all other Americans. Similar figures are available for only a few states, but taking Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois together in the years through 1850, a total of one hundred and twenty-five libraries were formed in areas in the three "under-eighteen" classes if census year before date of founding is used, and forty-four were in these classes if the later census year is used.56

There seems to be no obvious explanation for this relative slowness in Pennsylvania to found social libraries. In the three states immediately west of it, libraries were founded more rapidly in areas settled by New Englanders,57 so perhaps the Pennsylvania attitude is somewhat similar to that in other areas where the New England preoccupation with affairs of the mind was not present.

Religious and National Groups as Founders

For the great majority of social libraries in Pennsylvania, no particular religious or national group seems to have had any responsibility. And some libraries with religious or national sponsorship would perhaps not qualify as social libraries if details of their membership practices could be studied; it is often difficult to distinguish between a social library and one intended primarily for the benefit of an existing church or society.

At any rate it is clear that two religious groups were most interested in providing reading matter with few or no restrictions: the Society of Friends was responsible for most of the

57 Ibid., pp. 9-10.
religiously affiliated libraries founded before the Civil War, and the Roman Catholic Church for most of the ones after the war. In the entire period there were not more than twelve or thirteen libraries directly sponsored by religious groups, almost exactly half of them founded before the war and half after. About half were in large towns and half in smaller ones.

Of the eleven libraries where a foreign national interest was clearly influential, all but one were German, beginning with the *Mossheimische Gesellschaft* of Philadelphia, which started a library in 1792, and ending with the Central Turner Association of Pittsburgh, which started one in 1871 and was listed in the United States Bureau of Education's *Special Report* of 1876 as a free social library. Some of the German libraries included a portion of books in English, but the Library of Foreign Literature and Science, founded in Philadelphia in the early 1830's, excluded English-language books. The foreign-language libraries were almost all in larger towns.

It is clear, then, that the social library was for the most part a secular and native American agency in Pennsylvania, but that larger religious or foreign language groups were glad to take advantage of the form of organization to provide reading matter for their membership and for others who were interested.

**Social Libraries and Colleges**

If the place of the social library in the cultural life of the United States is to be understood, the library should be related to other agencies with somewhat similar aims. One of the purposes in founding these libraries was to provide the means for self-education, so a comparison with the agencies of formal education seems justified. The geographical pattern of founding of the lower schools in Pennsylvania is too complex and too obscure to provide a basis for comparison, but it is possible to find out about the founding of virtually all of the colleges.

Well over a hundred institutions of higher education had been

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FOUNDED IN PENNSYLVANIA BEFORE 1876, IF WE INCLUDE ALL THOSE WHICH AT LEAST INTENDED TO PROVIDE A LIBERAL ARTS OR PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION BEYOND THAT OBTAINABLE IN AN ACADEMY. Approximately sixty of these were liberal arts colleges; the rest were medical schools, dental colleges, theological seminaries, and engineering schools. This group of about a hundred does not include normal schools and commercial colleges, which almost always operated at a level too low to be considered part of “higher” education.

The medical schools and a few others clustered around Philadelphia, but liberal arts colleges were intentionally planted as far from the allurements of the larger towns as possible. Did this latter habit make the American college a frontier institution? Did colleges precede social libraries or was it the other way around? For some towns in Pennsylvania it is possible to find out whether a college or a social library came first. In each of nineteen towns or cities in the state there were at least one liberal arts college and one social library before 1876. In ten of these the social library came first, in eight the college came first, and in one they were both founded in the same year. Clearly, neither agency of culture can claim title as the pioneer in these towns.

This situation is in marked contrast to that in states farther west: of sixteen towns in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois which had both social libraries and colleges before 1850, all but two had social libraries first. The predominance of the social library in the early Middle West is possibly related to the New England origin of some settlers which we have noticed above.

Could it be that in Pennsylvania, where the colleges came first almost as often as did social libraries, there were several towns where they arrived at about the same time? Could the two agencies have been part of the same cultural movement in a community? The evidence seems to indicate that there was no relationship between the founding of the library and the college in the same town. In the eighteen towns where either the college or the library arrived at least a year before the other, the difference between

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About half of the liberal arts colleges are discussed in Charles H. Haskins and William I. Hull's *A History of Higher Education in Pennsylvania* (U. S. Bureau of Education Circular of Information No. 4, 1902). The Laws of the Pennsylvania General Assembly include the charters granted to other liberal arts colleges and to professional schools as well.

the founding dates of the earlier and later agency ranged from four to ninety-six years; in half of them, there were fifteen years or more between the founding dates.

THE LIVES OF THE LIBRARIES

This article must focus on the births of libraries, not their lives and not their deaths. The nature of the collections, the housing of the collections, and the manner in which the collections were used are all stories deserving separate treatment. But perhaps a few words about how they lived and died will indicate what significance should be attached to their births.

The social libraries of Pennsylvania were much like social libraries in other states as far as their organization and day-to-day operation were concerned. Ordinarily, each library was administered by a board of trustees or managers who were elected annually by the members. The board was responsible for the selection and care of the collection and the appointment of a librarian whose main duty was to be present at certain hours to supervise the circulation of the books. The smaller libraries were customarily kept in the librarian's home or place of business, but larger ones were in rented rooms or even, especially in Philadelphia, in buildings owned by the library associations.

One of the most important duties of the librarian or the board in all of the larger libraries and in a few of the smaller ones was the issuance of a printed catalog. Members owned copies of the catalog in order to make decisions about books to be borrowed before they went to the library or sent someone to borrow for them. At least ninety-seven catalogs or supplements were printed by Pennsylvania social libraries before 1876, many of them including also the constitution and by-laws and, occasionally, a historical sketch of the library. About three-fourths of these were issued by libraries in Philadelphia or its suburbs, and almost a third of them by the Library Company of Philadelphia.

Publications were not confined to catalogs; a few of the larger libraries issued their constitutions, rules, or histories separately, and three or four printed their annual reports. At least thirty such separate publications or series were printed during the period.

The chronological pattern for publications by Pennsylvania
social libraries is remarkably like the pattern for the founding of libraries: a few were printed in the colonial period, beginning with the Library Company’s first catalog in 1733 (now lost); no publications during the Revolution; greater activity in the 1790’s than immediately before or after that decade; a rate of publication from 1800 to 1830 which was higher than in colonial times; markedly increased activity from 1830 to 1860 (though here the parallel is not exact, decade-by-decade except for a drop in the early 1840’s); a little activity during the Civil War; and more publishing from 1865 to 1875 than in any earlier ten-year period. The general similarity of the patterns for library founding and library publications suggests that they are both fairly reliable indicators of library activity.

The Deaths of the Libraries

How long did these social libraries live? Fourteen of them have a chance for eternal life because they are still alive—a very good record, considering the vicissitudes which beset the life of any library dependent on the continuing interest of a purely voluntary organization. For thirty-three of the others, the date of death is known; but for the remaining one hundred and twenty-five, no exact date of death has come to light. The average age of the forty-eight which are either still living or for which the length of life is known is seventy-one years. This average does not represent a small number of long-lived institutions combined with many short-lived ones; the median is fifty-eight years. However, it seems likely that the age of the hundred and twenty-five libraries whose dates of death are not available must have been, on the average, less than that of the known ones. In general, a short life and obscurity would seem to go together.

In addition to uncertainty about the length of life of the great majority of these libraries, there is a second reason for caution: a library could cease to be effective several years before its collection was sold or turned over to some other library. However, Pennsylvania’s record for keeping its libraries alive is a good one in comparison with the record for the small number of other states where longevity has been studied. In New England, in the years when social libraries were flourishing, they lasted, on the average, about thirty-five years, and in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois,
less than half that long. Pennsylvanians may have been a little slower in establishing libraries but were more inclined to keep them alive, once they were started.

**Summary**

The Library Company of Philadelphia, the first social library in the colonies, founded in 1731, was preceded by a few town libraries and by some collections gathered by religious groups. It was followed, in Pennsylvania, by eleven other social libraries before the Revolution and by at least one hundred and sixty-one such libraries between the Revolution and 1876, a date which marks, as well as any, the end of the era of the social library. These libraries appeared slowly at first, then steadily at the rate of about one per year from the Revolution to 1830, then with increasing frequency until 1876 except during periods of less activity in the early 1840's and the Civil War years. They were being founded around Philadelphia and in the Southeast during the entire period, in the western part of the state after the Revolution, and infrequently in the central mountains and Northeast until after 1865, when they began to appear in equal numbers in all parts of the state. They were seldom formed before the population in an area had reached a density of about eighteen inhabitants per square mile, but seem to have been established as close to the frontier as were the early colleges. The Society of Friends, the Roman Catholic Church, and German-speaking people were mainly responsible for the small number of libraries with some religious or foreign-language connection. Pennsylvanians seem to have been a little slower than people in some other Northern states to establish social libraries but, once established, several of the Pennsylvania libraries lived to a ripe old age.

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*Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library*, p. 73; material on which McMullen, “The Founding of Social and Public Libraries in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois,” was based.*