The Phoenix Library

By Harry R. Warfel

Bucknell University

The Phoenix Library, established in Centerville, Washington County, Pa., grew out of the discontinued Fredericktown Library, an organization which began as early as March 7, 1796, (1) and which closed its career, we know not under what circumstances, sometime in 1825. In that year William Welsh of Centerville purchased the entire library at auction, and then gathered about him a number of his friends and neighbors. In a meeting, held on August 20, 1825, the appended constitution was adopted and provisions were made for the purchase of the books and the operation of a library society.

From the treasurer's books one learns that the following men took stock in the society: John Rogers $14.72½; David Hilles $8.82½; Jonathan Morris $10.19; Joseph Baker $13.85; J. D. Hall $10.19; Wm. Welsh $10.29; Henry Smith $9.12; Eber Heston $11.06½; Roger Hartley $12.78; Jonathan Knight $9.69; Mahlon Linton $12.24; Benjamin Kenney $6.02½, and John Baker $10.69. On what basis the division was made, now cannot be learned. Other initial members of the organization who entered by the payment of the entrance share price of $4.00 each were: John Cleaver, Lewis Morris, George Morrison, and Arthur Donaldson.

The first annual meeting of the society was held at the home of Arthur Donaldson on October 1, 1825, and the following officers were elected: President, Wm. Welsh; Secretary, David Hilles; Treasurer and Librarian, Arthur Donaldson. It was provided that the library should be installed in the home of the librarian. The price of a share was fixed at four dollars, and provision was made to pay interest on initial payments larger than that amount. The annual dues were set at fifty cents a year. These rates remain-
ed in force until 1839 when the share value was raised to five dollars and the annual dues to one dollar.

Because various neighbors, unable to purchase shares, desired the benefits of the library, the following lending rates were established by order of a special meeting held on October 15, 1825: "The following Rules are now adopted for the Government of the Society respecting the letting of Books to wit: Any member holding a Book longer than the time specified in the foregoing constitution, shall pay at the following rate per week viz 12½ cents for each Folio & Quarto Volume 6¼ cents for each octavo and 4 cents for each Duodecimo. Any person taking books on hire shall pay at the above rates."

At various times members contributed books to pay either the cost of a share or to pay annual dues. Thus Joseph Baker was credited with the price of a share and his first year's dues by contributing Robertson's two volume History of America. Thus came Dickens' Pickwick Papers in 1839. How many volumes were added to the original 147 cannot be determined from the present records. The minutes for October 17, 1839 record this addition: "The committee appointed to borrow money report that they borrowed the money and purchased books to the amount of $37.69."

The final payment of the original notes were made on May 26, 1827. But that the organization did not function happily always is indicated by the motion to dissolve made on October 4, 1834. A special meeting held two weeks later to vote upon the motion ended with a decision to continue. That a renewed interest was taken in the organization is evidenced by the fact that a new book-case was ordered purchased in 1837.

The last recorded meeting took place on October 5, 1840, but no business was transacted because the necessary quorum was not present. The lending lists, though, contain entries as late as April 20, 1845, when Arthur Donaldson borrowed three volumes of the encyclopedia. It is surmised that the society disbanded some time this year. Why it closed its doors and what distribution of the books was made are unknown. Because books with the book-plate of the library are still to be found in the homes of the descend-
ants of the original members, it is inferred that an equable
distribution was made.

Men who borrowed, but who were not in the original
constitution convention, were David Farquhar, K. B. Rig-
gle, Wm. Griffith, J. B. Welsh, Joseph Hineman, S. Nolen,
Wm. Mason, James Dorsey, John Cleaver, William Linton,
Joseph Baker, Charles Hilles, Wm. Blackburn, Roger Hart-
ley, Benjamin Kenney, John McCay, McCowen, Mahlon
Some of these men acquired shares through purchase, and
others merely borrowed an occasional volume. Hiram
Baker in 1828 was the first to affiliate himself with the
society by the purchase of a share. The others, it is be-
lieved, purchased the shares of men who dropped their con-
nections or purchased the shares from the estates of de-
ceased members.

That the library was an active force in the small com-
unity is evidenced by the fact that more than 100 vol-
umes were circulated between the founding date and Jan-
uary 1, 1826. The average annual circulation was 400
volumes a year.

The appended copy of the initial accession list will in-
dicate the nature of the books and the probable appeal they
held for the members.

The original minute and record books are now in the
possession of Mrs. Eva Linton Lilley, California, Pa., and
it is through her kindness that the writer has been able to
make this statement.


Constitution of the Phoenix Library

Centerville, Washington County, Pa.

We the subscribers being sensible of the advantages
resulting to society from Literature; & being desirous for
the acquisition of useful knowledge; have therefore associ-
ated together for the purpose of procuring at our common
expense a Library of Books to be deposited at or near Cen-
treville in the county of Washington, Penna.****To be
designated & known by the name of the Phoenix Li-

dary.****
And for the better government of the society, as well as to make known the rights and privileges of the social compact.***WE ordain and establish this Constitution Voluntarily binding ourselves by our annexed signatures to observe the following rules and regulations to wit.*****

1st. The officers of the society shall consist of a President a Secretary a Treasurer seven directors & a Librarian*****

2nd. The members of the society shall meet annually on the first Saturday in October at the Library Room, and between the hours of 10 oclock A. M. and 2 oclock P. M., by a majority of votes choose from among themselves a President and seven directors, who shall continue in office for one year, or untill others are elected, and when the Polls are closed they shall immediately proceed to perform their respective duties, & shall choose from among themselves a secretary, whose duty it shall be to keep correct minutes of the proceedings of the society, & at each meeting to read the minutes of the proceeding one, he shall carefully preserve all documents belonging to the society filed and arranged in a methodical manner.

When thus organized they shall proceed to appoint a Librarian who shall also be Treasurer; shall fix the value of a share in the society, which shall be paid by every member before admittance into membership; shall fix the yearly dues to be paid by every member of the society, which shall not exceed one dollar, nor be less than fifty cents, (which dues shall be paid in advance on the first Saturday in October) and at that or any other meeting, shall have power to call a special meeting, & dispose of all moneys in the hands of the treasurer for the use of the Society, to purchase Books for the society, to make bye-laws & regulations for the government of the Society and its concerns, but not to be repugnant to this constitution or that of the State or of the United States, they shall keep fair Books of their proceedings which shall be deposited in the Library for the inspection of the members, and shall again meet at the same place on the first Saturday in April annually, thus having two regular Semiannual meetings, & at such other times as they may appoint, four of whom shall be a quorum, and in the absence of the President the directors shall appoint one of themselves to preside in that meeting.*

It shall be the duty of the President at all meetings of the Society to preserve order, & to transmit to the direc-
tors any communications he may have received relative to
the business of the society, to recommend such measures
as he may judge necessary, for the welfare of the same, &
to have a vote on all subjects of discussion besides a cast-
ing vote in case the society should be equally divided****
3rd. It shall be the duty of the Librarian to keep the
Books in proper order, it shall be his duty also to let Books
to members, keeping a correct account when let & when
returned in a Book to be provided for that purpose, & to
examine the Books when returned, note the injury done (if
any) & report the same to the directors at the next meet-
ing.** It shall be the duty of the Librarian to give a re-
ceipt for all Books & property belonging to the company
which shall be deposited in his care, & render an account
thereof when called on by the directors*******
4th. Any member residing at a distance not exceeding
two miles from the Library may keep a Book four weeks;
all over that distance may keep them six weeks******
5th. Any person purchasing a share at any time other
than the time fixed for yearly payments to be made, &
paying the purchase money shall be entitled to the use of
Books, by paying such part of the yearly dues, as shall be
due at the time of such annual payments****
6th. If any member after being duly elected, shall refuse
to serve in any office in this society without giving a suf-
ficient reason, he shall be fined in a sum equal to his yearly
dues for that year,*****
7th. No officer of the society, excepting the Librarian
shall be entitled to any compensation for their services at-
tending at the services thereof******
8th. Any member neglecting to pay his yearly dues with-
in twelve months after the same shall become due, shall
not have the use of the Books until the same shall be paid
into the Treasury & a continuation of such neglect until
the arrears of dues & fines (if any) amount to the price of
a share, for the time being, such shares shall be for-
feited******
9th. Each person who may make application to become a
member shall be made acquainted with the articles of as-
sociation & on paying the stipulated price of a share for
the time being & subscribing his name to the said articles
in the presence of the Librarian, he shall become a mem-
ber*******
10th. No article of this constitution shall be altered or amended unless it be at a stated meeting in October, & notice of such alteration or amendment be given to the members of the society previously, nor unless two thirds of the members at such meeting concur in such alteration or amendment*** Done in convention at Centreville the twentieth day of August in the Year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and twenty-five.-1825******

Hiram Baker
Joshua Linton
Jos. Mills

John Rogers
David Hilles
Jonathan Morris
John Cleaver
Joseph Baker
J. D. Hall
Lewis Morris
C. Wm. Welsh
George Morrison
Henry Smith
Arthur Donaldson
Eben Heston
Roger Hartley
J. Knight


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Note. Astericks replace pen flourishes to denote punctuation. The transcription is a faithful one.

H. R. W.