



The Library of The General Society of Mechanics & Tradesmen

Founded in 1785, The General Society of Mechanics & Tradesmen is dedicated to improving the educational and cultural opportunities for people in the City of New York

1820

The Library of The General Society Celebrates Two Hundred Memorable Years

2020



The General Society Library

Our thanks to Dr. Janet Greene for her exceptional chapter about the General Society Library included in 'America's Membership Libraries' published by Oak Knoll Press, which is partially excerpted for this article, and to Polly Guerin for contributions from her engaging book, 'The General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen of the City of New York: A History' published by the History Press.

November 25th, 2020 will be a very special occasion, as The General Society Library will celebrate its 200th Anniversary. This historic institution will mark two centuries of providing vital access to educational resources, special collections, historic archives and recreational reading for the people of the City of New York.

When you enter the library, you will notice the Library's stunning architecture. In 1904, architect Ralph Townsend transformed the space into a soaring atrium to serve as a new home for The General Society Library and later also serve as a lecture hall. His design added ornate faux-marble columns and decorated plasterwork to a utilitarian space, creating a room that today, under the glow of its delicate skylight, is both grand and intimate.

This magnificent room has housed the book collections of The General Society since 1899, but is actually the fifth location of the Library, which was founded in 1820 as a

resource for the apprentices by the master craftsmen of New York City. Today the Library is also known as a venue for educational and cultural events including lectures, concerts and film screenings. During the hours before these public events, however, the room is inhabited by students, researchers, readers and writers who work in a majestic space surrounded by books published since the late 1700's.

As founders and custodians of this remarkable library, each generation of members of The General Society of Mechanics & Tradesmen of the City of New York has added to a collection of useful and instructive reading material for the use of the working people of New York.

The beginning of this story lies in 1785, shortly after the American Revolution when 22 craftsmen joined together to form "The General Society of Mechanics" as a mutual benefit and fraternal organization. Robert Boyd, Blacksmith, was chosen as their first president, and selected the blacksmith's insignia and motto as their own. "By Hammer and Hand All Arts Do Stand" asserted the importance of skilled work in the building of a new Nation.

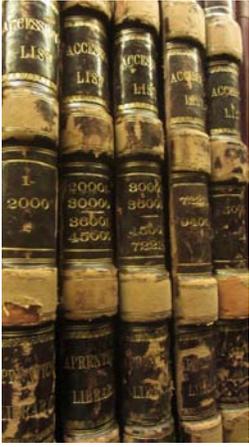
By 1820, 1325 men from 102 trades, who called their skills mechanical or "handmade arts," had joined The General Society. Some prospered while others faltered, as a combination of skill, luck and changing technology transformed their workshops. The educational system practiced in the Artisan world changed as well; traditional guidelines of apprenticeship specified that the master was obliged to teach his apprentice to read and write. In 1820, the members of the General Society founded two educational institutions, a day school and a library to respond to this need.

The Library, founded in 1820, as the Apprentices' Library, was created to support the Mechanics School, and to encourage the education and advancement of the members' children and the apprentices.

Books were both expensive and scarce in 1820, so to establish its library, The General Society solicited support and donated books from the mechanics of the City.

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The Library of the General Society



Library Accession Books

The Library collection was also expanded by generous donations by members. In 1837, a popular lecture program was introduced that highlighted the enthusiasm for adult pursuit of knowledge that continues to the present day. Some of the preeminent lecturers of the day who participated were Horace Greeley, the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, and Rev. John Pierpont, whose varied topics discussed included items as “The Antiquities of Egypt,”

“Chemistry,” “Work and Labor,” “Arctic Regions,” “Nature and Society” and the “World’s Fair.” In 1858, the Apprentices Library was renamed the “Free Library of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen of The City of New York,” eventually abbreviated to The General Society Library.

In 1886, The General Society’s Library became subsidized by public funds, since at that point New York lacked a public library system. The General Society’s circulating collection, within three years, was the largest Library in the City both in terms of circulation and volumes. As the Library grew in popularity and size, in 1899 it moved eventually to the Library’s final home at 20 West 44th Street.

Here, the generous \$250,000 gift of General Society Member, Andrew Carnegie, made possible both a reconstruction of the building and the addition of the unique Library with the soaring skylight that lies at the heart of The General Society building. A bequest from financier Amos Eno, whose head carpenter was a Society member, further enhanced the library with a set of cast iron vertical shelves for the Library.

However, also in 1899, public funds were channeled away from private libraries in preparation for establishing a public library for the City and the Library became self-supporting. Today the collection continues to serve both as a membership library for the public and a free library for students enrolled in the educational programs sponsored by the General Society.

The book collection includes books and periodicals on a wide variety of subjects. Most notable is a collection of material classified as the “Useful Arts.” These books and periodicals include a treatise on electricity published by Benjamin Franklin in 1757, to books and scientific reports concerning the building of the infrastructure of urban America. Many of these books were texts for classes taught at the Mechanics institute.

A major component of this collection includes books on architecture. In addition, the Library is populated by a wide cross-section of popular contemporary fiction and non-fiction and has a collection devoted to publishing.

In recent times, some of the many authors who were library members or have spoken at the Library include Isaac Asimov, Brendan Gill, Tom Wolfe, Alice Walker, Richard Ford, E.L. Doctorow, George Plimpton, Colson Whitehead, Michael Cunningham, Alice Hoffman and Richard Price.



Historic Book Plate

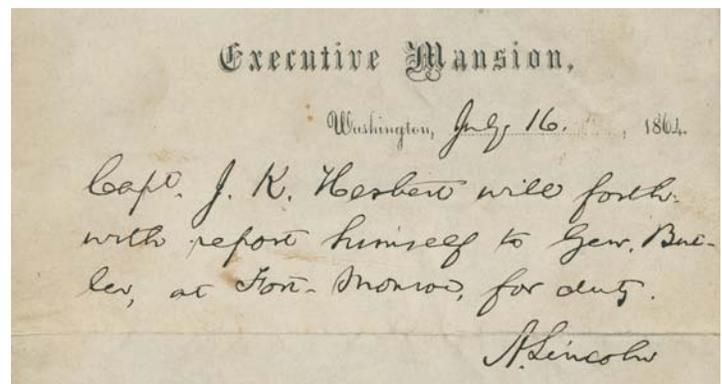
The Library Today

Since The General Society’s founding in 1785, extensive archives continue to be accumulated. Vital to safeguarding these pieces of history was the grant-funded construction of The General Society Archives Room which was completed in 2010. Just some of the important pieces we store in the archives room are the original 1785-1802 handwritten minutes book, the original membership signature logbook and an original printing of the 1798 Charter of

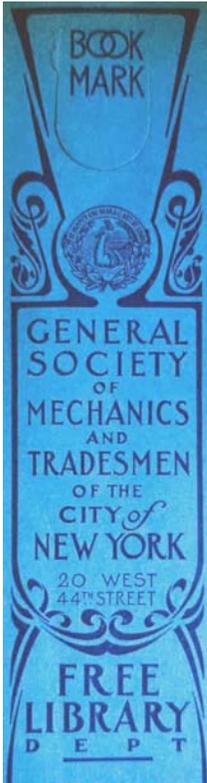
Incorporation. Some museum items include a historic bookplate signed by GSMT member Jacob Lorillard, and letters written by Benjamin Franklin and Abraham Lincoln.



The Original Signature Membership Logbook dating from 1785



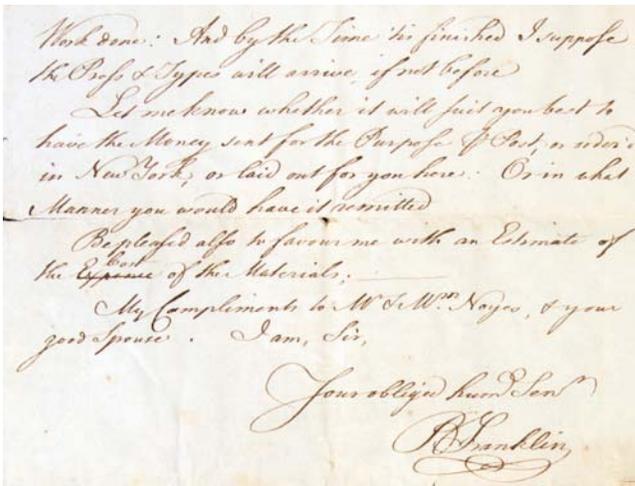
A note written by Abraham Lincoln



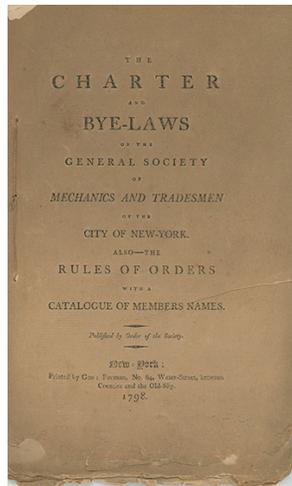
Temperature and humidity are the important elements that affect paper. The degradation of paper consists mainly of oxidation, hydrolysis and fiber bonding, with mold growth becoming apparent in high humidity and brittle paper in low humidity. The climate control stability provided by our independent system is most important, since constant change will stress paper products. LED lighting is used to eliminate damaging ultraviolet light in the space. The archival housing of our valuable records creates microclimates to minimize the rate of change, as well as provide an acid-free environment for further protection.

In 2016, The Library and Archives were honored and grateful to partner with the Metropolitan New York Library Council in a grant-funded digitization project to further preserve and increase the accessibility of 364 objects selected from archival materials and museum holdings, known as the General Society Industry and Culture Collection, featuring a wide variety of General Society activities including patriotic, civic, educational and literary pursuits. The items are available to the public on the Digital Culture of Metropolitan New York website (dcmny.org).

Historic Book Mark



Benjamin Franklin Correspondence: Excerpt of Specifications written by for his printing house dated October 25, 1753



The Charter and Bye-Laws of the General Society (1798)

Today, The General Society Library remains one of only three membership circulating libraries located in New York City. It makes its extensive collections available to other institutions and the public. The book and periodical collections of the Library span two centuries and are suited to both scholarly research and recreational reading. Library members also enjoy access to current fiction, biography and non-fiction.

The Library continues to support the educational programs of The General Society, including The Mechanics Institute and The General Society's own lecture programs, a tradition that started in 1837 and includes the "Labor, Literature and Landmark" lectures and the "Artisan" lecture series, a salute to the original 22 craftsmen who founded the Society. It also serves as a center for many cultural organizations in support of their own programs.

The General Society Library, as an important cultural and educational institution, has extended its reach and influence throughout its history. May it continue to flourish for generations to come.

The General Society
of Mechanics & Tradesmen of
the City of New York
"By Hammer & Hand
All Arts Do Stand"

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For GSMT Event Calendar, visit the
General Society website at
www.generalsociety.org



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*The General Society Library
Bicentennial Celebration Edition
1820-2020*



The Library ca. 1936.

The Mission of The Library is to:
SUPPORT the educational programs of The General Society;
PRESERVE and BUILD on the historic collections of The General Society;
PROVIDE ACCESS to the collections of The General Society for researchers and the public;
PROMOTE an understanding of urban work and its history.

Check our website for current updates on General Society Programs and send us your email to receive event information:
www.generalsociety.org

GENERAL SOCIETY LIBRARY FOUNDER, THOMAS ROYCE MERCEIN



As The General Society Library celebrates the 200th anniversary of its opening date, we remember its founder, Thomas Royce Mercein (1782-1843), whose portrait hangs in our Assembly Room and is shown here, along with the cover of his printed address given that day, November 25th, 1820; the date chosen was the 37th anniversary of Evacuation Day when the last of the defeated British troops left New York City. Mercein, who was a Baker by trade, joined the Society in 1803 and served as President in 1827. He was convinced that the success of the new nation would depend upon an educated populace, and stated as much in his address when he declared: "Ignorance and Despotism have shown their kindred qualities, and their indissoluble connexion in every age—and Liberty has ever been most flourishing when the faculties of a nation expanded with moral and intellectual energy."

Mercein aimed at the youth of our fledgling country while also establishing a school for children along with the Apprentices Library, as it was known at that time. The school evolved into our present-day Mechanics Institute, and the Library progressed to a Free Library serving the entire city until the advent of the New York Public Library. The General Society Library eventually assumed its present form as a membership library focusing on labor, the useful arts and architecture, literature, New York City history, and supporting the curriculum of the Mechanics Institute.

