



Window to Yesterday

The Role of the Thursday Club in Founding the Washington County Free Library

By Elizabeth Howe

The women in post-Civil War Hagerstown were forward-thinking and ambitious. In 1877, five years before Enoch Pratt offered the gift of "his" library to the citizens of Baltimore, these women formed the first Women's Club in town with the intention of establishing a public library.

Who were these energetic women, and how did they accomplish their goal...or did they?

The leader in this endeavor was Clara H. Jenness Hamilton (1837-1919) who, several years later, became the First Lady of Maryland while her husband, William T. Hamilton, was Governor from 1880-1884. After returning from a visit to New Hampshire where she had grown up, she gathered a few kindred spirits and shared her enthusiasm with them for starting a women's club. One of Mrs. Hamilton's closest collaborators in this effort was 24-year-old Anna H. Kennedy (1852-1941). Anna was the granddaughter of Thomas Kennedy, a member of the Maryland Legislature, champion of religious liberty and author of the "Jew Bill," whose statue was recently installed in Hagerstown.

Years later in 1936, at age 84, Anna reflected on the founding of the club: "We decided on a name — 'Thursday Club,' and a membership of twenty-five. On March 5th, 1877, we held our first meeting at the residence of Mrs. Hamilton and organized the Club..."

In J. Thomas Scharf's History of Western Maryland he explains that early in its existence, "it became necessary to incorporate the Club in order to hold the library. . . and make it a permanent institution, in the advantages of which the citizens might participate..."¹

The founders decided to keep things simple; there would be no Constitution and no By-laws. "Not realizing the need," no minutes were recorded. The Club members elected only two officers: Mrs. Hamilton was elected President, remaining so for many years, and Anna Kennedy (who married Judge James A. Findlay in 1885) was elected Secretary-Treasurer. She also held her position for many years — until the Club ceased to exist.

Anna wrote of Mrs. Hamilton that "...no group ever had a more inspiring or delightful leader. She gave herself and her house to the proposition; no amount of labor

deterred her from any suggested work, and the success in organizing the Club was largely due to her leadership."

Anna Kennedy Findlay herself was one of "Hagerstown's most public spirited citizens. . ." as noted in her obituary in the Morning Herald of January 31, 1941. "Her death marks the loss of one of the most commanding figures in the religious, charitable, civic and social life of Hagerstown...Throughout her long and useful career, she was in the forefront of all movements for the welfare and betterment of the community. She was untiring in her efforts for public good."

The Thursday Club directed its activities toward three goals. The first was fund raising, the second, procuring books, and the third, securing a place to house their library collection and provide a place for patrons to access it.

Raising Funds

Every two weeks the Club met in one of the member's homes. The meetings were varied and might be "a Club Tea, a literary meeting with speaker, a musical evening with program, a play or other special entertainment." To belong to the Club the dues were 50 cents a year plus 5 cents to be given at the bi-weekly meetings by members and guests. An exception to this was a Club Tea evening when 25 cents was expected.²

In addition to the funds raised at the regular meetings, the Thursday Club members worked diligently to raise money for the Library by giving a variety of entertainments such as "cooking parties, a Mother Goose party, a beautiful International Tea at the Hose Hall, and very excellent theatricals." The famous Boston Quintette Club was brought in and gave a concert which added \$51.90 to the library funds. Two hundred chances were sold for the raffle of a

"beautiful silk comfort" and \$95 was raised. During the summers of 1878 and 1879, Archery Contests were held weekly at Oak Hill, the summer residence of Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton. "The grounds were extensive, and east of the house in a beautiful old apple orchard we set up the targets. We offered a prize for the best shot of the season."³

The theatricals were highly praised in the Herald and Torch Light. "The entertainment given...under the (Continued on page 14)



Clara Hamilton was the driving force behind the establishment of a library for the citizens of Hagerstown. (file photo)

(Continued from page 12)



Anna Kennedy Findlay was one of the "founding mothers" of the Thursday Club. (Courtesy of Washington County Historical Society)

Herald and Torch Light, an author wrote glowingly about the Thursday Club. "The Thursday Club gave its first entertainment of the season at the Academy of Music last Thursday evening. These entertainments, as ought to be well known by this time, are given for the benefit of the Public Library. And to the credit of the reading public of Hagerstown, it may be said, the size and character of the audience indicated that the generous efforts of those ladies and gentlemen who have devoted their time and talents to this enterprise, are not unappreciated."⁵

Procuring Books

Although the Thursday Club used some of its own funds to purchase books for the library, they were fortunate to receive the bulk of their start-up volumes from another source. "[The Thursday Club] has received 2500 volumes of works from the Trustees of the College of St. James...This will be a good beginning, and as the annual subscription it is understood, will be only \$3.00, a most excellent opportunity will be presented to the citizens of Hagerstown generally of acquiring much valuable knowledge from the establishment of this library at a small cost."⁶

Saint James College closed in 1864, and Anna wrote "...the books belonging to the three literary societies of the College had been boxed and stored for fourteen years. Through the active interest of Edward W. Mealey of the last graduating class, and a member of the Belles Lettres Society, the books of this society were donated to the Thursday Club. They consisted of books of reference and standard books of that period. They formed a valuable nucleus for the Library which the Club decided it could now establish."

In another reference to the books received from the College of St. James, J. Thomas Scharf says that they had been "selected with great care through a period of eighteen

auspices of the Thursday Club, was in every particular a most enjoyable affair... The house was well filled, and the receipts must have been good. Hagerstown may be congratulated on its amateur stage talent. The performance was given for the benefit of the Library—an institution that deserves well of the people of Hagerstown, as it is free to all, who pay the small tax imposed."⁴

In another edition of the

or twenty years by members of the Society. These works comprise all standard histories, novels, reviews, all the English poets, and works of general interest."⁷

Location

Two "communicating rooms" were rented on the second floor of the Crist building, No. 60 W. Washington Street for \$125.00 a year. There was a front reading room with a large table and comfortable chairs and a back room containing book cases along the walls with a double row through the center. "They were painted black, with the shelves edged with scarlet leather fastened on with brass tacks."⁸

In a 1923 newspaper article, Colonel William P. Lane (father of Governor William P. Lane, Jr.), one of the few community theater actors and supporters of the Library who was still alive at the time, chuckled as he remembered, "We covered the shelves with scalloped paper...and tried to make ourselves believe we were combining meritorious service to the town with our own personal pleasure."⁹

When all was in order, the Thursday Club Library Association opened to the public on October 1, 1879. The members of the Thursday club were "proud and happy to have accomplished their purpose."¹⁰

The Thursday Club operated the Library for approximately ten years. In 1886, the Library moved into two rooms on the second floor of the Mail building on South Jonathan Street at a reduced rent of \$75.00 per year. The Club continued giving theatrical entertainments to raise funds to purchase books and magazines. They always hoped that the annual subscription would provide enough revenue to pay the expenses needed for the day
(Continued on page 16)

The twenty-six women who were the charter members of the Thursday Club. (Asterisks indicate the incorporators):

Mrs. Wm. T. Hamilton*
Miss Ida Hammond
Mrs. E. W. Mealey*
Mrs. Hays*
Mrs. Alexander Neill*
Mrs. Frank Osborne
Mrs. H. H. Keedy*
Mrs. Albert Small*
Miss Bettie Lawrence
Mrs. Halm
Miss Molly Schley
Miss Dunlap
Miss Anna H. Kennedy*
Mrs. Alexander Armstrong
Miss Adelaide Berry
Mrs. Frank Darby
Mrs. Tryon H. Edwards
Mrs. Laura Hughes
Miss Lulu Harris
Miss Bessie Mitchell
Miss Minnie Moon
Miss Fanny Motter
Mrs. Peter Negley*
Mrs. Henry N. Onderdonk
Miss Lizzie Ragan
Mrs. Buchanan Schley

(Continued from page 14)

to day operations. But, "In those days Hagerstown was not a reading community, and the interest in the Library flagged, and the number of subscribers decreased so seriously, that the Thursday Club was obliged to aid in paying the running expenses of the Library."¹¹

At a meeting of the members, most likely in February, 1888, it was resolved to change the name of the Thursday Club Library Association to the Hagerstown Library, and to appoint fifteen men to be known as the Board of Managers of the Hagerstown Library. The Board members were to come from different sections of the community to help interest a variety of citizens in the Library. The Board was directed to "canvass for subscribers, hold monthly meetings, and report to the President of the Thursday Club."¹²

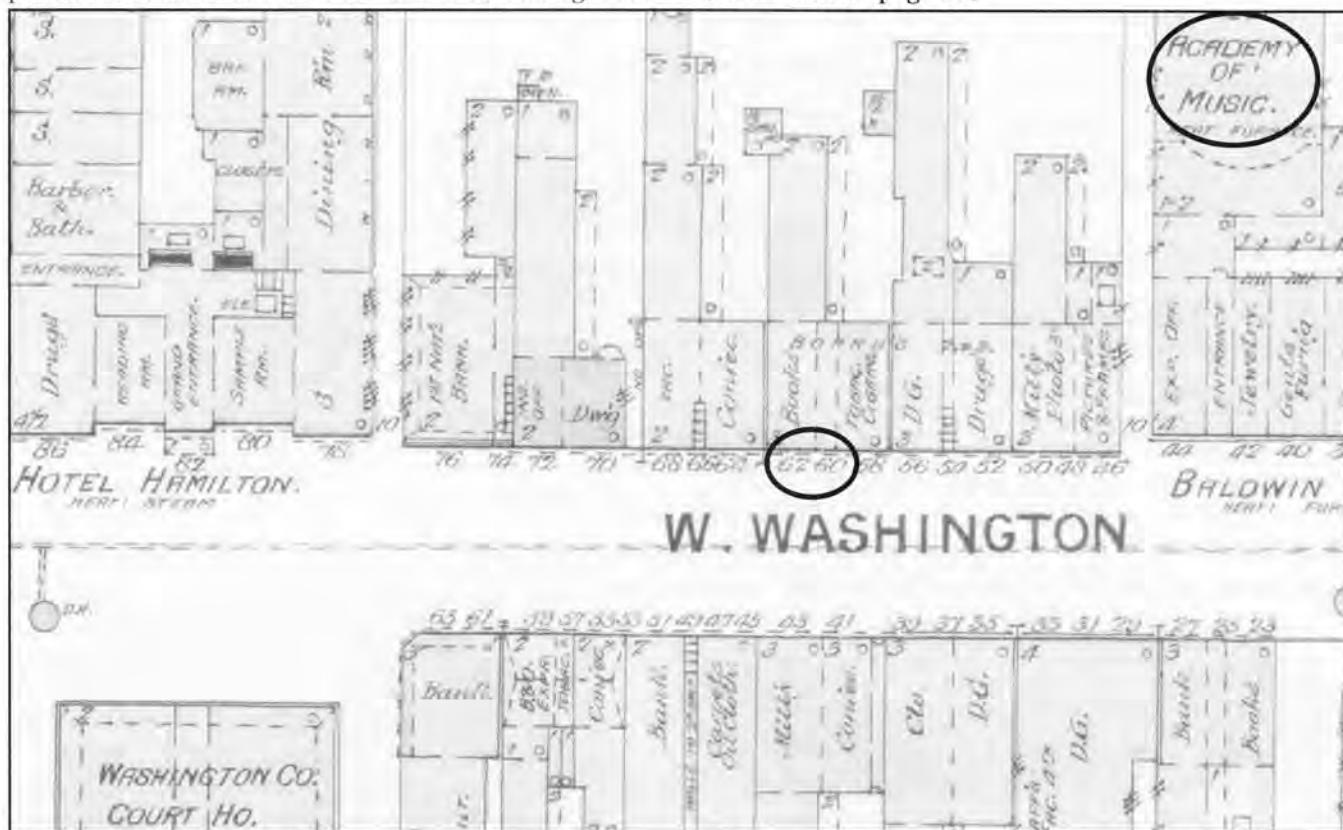
Apparently things did not improve after the men took over. On June 27, 1889, The Hagers-Town Mail candidly reported: "The committee of gentlemen who assumed the management of the Public Library more than a year ago, report to the ladies of the Thursday Club that they have not been able to make a success of it and have therefore surrendered it into the hands of the Thursday Club. It had been contended by many for some years back that the Thursday Club, although they had kept the library open, subscribed for magazines, bought some new books and paid all expenses, were not the proper persons to make a success of it – that if the management

was made more popular and put in the hands of men, it would be made a splendid success. The suggestion was adopted and the ladies gave the library into the hands of a carefully selected committee of fifteen gentlemen selected from among professional men, merchants and artisans. Nothing was left unrepresented in this committee."

"The result of the management has been to close the library, no new books bought, the subscriptions to magazines lapsed and the books thrown back upon the ladies, that much the worse for wear and considerably in debt. This would seem to be a sufficient vindication of the previous management of the ladies."

Following the failure of the men, the Thursday Club attempted to reopen the Library. "Since the Library closed on the first of April there has been a great deal of inquiry about it and many expressions of a desire to have it continued. This will be done if there is a sufficient number to justify it. Those who desire to have the library resumed are requested to leave their names at once with Mrs. James Findlay, Mrs. D. H. Wiles, Mrs. H. A. McComas, or with Mr. Williams at the Mail office. If the number of names will justify it the library will be reopened to the public on July 1st and a librarian engaged to keep the rooms open a certain number of hours each day."¹³

On Monday, August 5, 1889, the library reopened in the Mail building with the limited hours of 9:30-11:00 a.m. The men had reduced the yearly subscription rate to \$1.00; (Continued on page 18)



According to Anna Kennedy and newspaper reports, the Library of the Thursday Club was originally located on the second floor of the Crist Building which was at 60 or 62 W. Washington Street as shown on this 1887 map. Also, note the Academy Theatre where some of their Theatricals were held to raise funds for the Library. The current courtyard of the University System of Maryland at Hagerstown is the probable location of the Crist Building. (Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division)

(Continued from page 16)

the Thursday Club members raised it back to \$3.00. After two years, the Library closed again in 1891, and the books were boxed and stored.¹⁴

However, the untiring efforts of the Thursday Club were not in vain. Anna recalled, "Mr. Mealey (who was instrumental in effecting the donation of books from St. James College) was always deeply interested in our efforts for a Library, but he knew a Library could not be established without financial aid from generous friends."¹⁵

"In the early part of the year 1897, interviews which were to bring about events of the utmost importance to Hagerstown and Washington County were taking place between Edward W. Mealey and Benjamin F. Newcomer both natives of Washington County."¹⁶

Mr. Newcomer, President of the Safe Deposit and Trust Company of Baltimore, had been very successful financially and wanted to do something for his birth county. Mr. Mealey's suggestion of the gift of a free library "touched a responsive chord" in Mr. Newcomer.¹⁷

"Mr. Newcomer knew of our struggles, and had expressed his interest, and he and Mr. Mealey had conferred on the subject of a Library. After several years of anxious waiting, to our great delight it was announced that Mr. Newcomer would give \$50,000 to Washington County for a Free Library."¹⁸

Once the Washington County Free Library was established, "The Thursday Club Library Association which had adopted the title of the Hagerstown Library, voted to donate all the books in the Library, those which they had received from the Belle Lettres Society, and those which the Club had purchased, to the new Washington County Free Library..."¹⁹

"Mary Lemist Titcomb who had previous library experience in Massachusetts and Vermont was chosen as librarian, beginning her duties...February 1st, 1901 in two office rooms in Mealey Row. Here the books formerly belonging to the Belle Lettres Society of the College of St. James were examined and classified." Some were not usable, some were sent to the bindery for repairs, and

The fifteen men from different sections of the community who were appointed by the women of the Thursday Club as the Board of Managers of the Hagerstown Library in early 1888. (Information on their livelihoods was found in Randall's General Directory of Hagerstown, 1893. Western Maryland Room's original copy of the Directory is digitized at www.whilbr.org.)

Buchanan Schley - Attorney at Law

Rev. Edwin Delk - Pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church

Charles A. Little - Lawyer

J. F. Futterer - City Cafe Restaurant in the City Hotel Building

S. M. Bloom - Wholesale grocers, dry goods and notions

W. T. H. Barr - Ticket agent for the B&O Railroad

C. W. Adams - Unknown

J. Clarence Lane - Lawyer

Jacob Monath - Barber

Louis Rose - Clerk

John Feldman - Manager of the National Building and Loan Association

William Wittenbacher - Lawyer

J. H. Blake - Publisher of Daily and Weekly News

Prof. Pearson - Principal of the Male High School

M. L. Keedy - Lawyer

New Advertisements.

LADIES OF THE
THURSDAY CLUB
PROPOSE HAVING A
THEATRICAL ENTERTAINMENT,
AT THE
ACADEMY OF MUSIC,
Thursday Evening, November 18, 1880,
FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE
PUBLIC LIBRARY.

Admission..... 40 Cents.

Tickets for sale at Mobley's Book Store. No extra charge for reserved seats.

Doors open at 7.30. Commence at 8. nov12

Above is the November 11, 1880, advertisement for the November 18 Theatrical Entertainment to be presented by the Thursday Club. (Herald Mail, November 11, 1880)

some were "sufficiently well preserved to be prepared for the shelves at once...a nucleus of about 1,100 volumes of standard works was gathered."²⁰

Thus, after years of working and waiting, the Thursday Club's dream was realized. Anna Kennedy Findlay's final thoughts in 1936 were "...though we did not attain our goal of founding a Public Library, we had a large part in the movement for the establishing of the Washington County Free Library."²¹

Sources:

¹J. Thomas Scharf, History of Western Maryland, p. 1160
^{2,3,8,10,11,12,15,18,19}Anna Kennedy Findlay, 1936

⁴Herald and Torch Light, May 3, 1879

⁵Herald and Torch Light, November 24, 1880

⁶Herald and Torch Light, August 14, 1878

⁷J. Thomas Scharf, History of Western Maryland, p. 1160

⁸The Morning Herald, February 27, 1923

⁹The Hagers-Town Mail, June 27, 1889

¹⁰Herald and Torch Light, August 8, 1889, and Anna Kennedy Findlay, 1936

¹¹¹²Mary Lemist Titcomb, Story of the Washington County Free Library, 1931?, page 5

¹³- Mary Lemist Titcomb, Story of the Washington County Free Library, 1931?, page 8

¹⁴Elizabeth Howe, CA, is a Reference Librarian and Certified Archivist in the Western Maryland Room of the Washington County Free Library. Much of the information in this article came from an 8-page manuscript that Anna Kennedy Findlay wrote in 1936)

(Note: The logo used on page 12 with this Window to Yesterday feature was the first bookplate that was used by the Washington County Free Library. It features a likeness of Mr. Benjamin F. Newcomer. Courtesy Western Maryland Room of the WCFL)