

## CHAPTER 1

# The Pioneers: Three Subscription Libraries, 440 Years of Service to New York

*Libraries are reservoirs of strength, grace and wit, reminders of order, calm and continuity, lakes of mental energy, neither warm nor cold, light nor dark.*

**Germaine Greer**

Young Samuel Clemens, on a quest to see all of the cities in America that he had read about in books, visited New York in 1853 and soon found work as a printer's assistant at one of New York's many publishing companies. He took lodging at a boarding house on Duane Street and spent evenings at a library that had been established for young workers to better their lot in life through learning. As far as we can tell that library did not survive into modern times, but three libraries from that time did. It has not always been easy, but the three institutions are very proud of their history and their tenacity, serving New Yorkers through the Civil War, World Wars I and II, the Great Depression, the 2008 Mess, and Hurricane Sandy. It was a special treat to visit them and listen to their stories.

### THE NEW YORK SOCIETY LIBRARY

Address: 53 East 79th Street, New York, NY 10075

URL: <https://www.nysoclib.org/>

Telephone: (212) 288-6900

E-mail: [reference@nysoclib.org](mailto:reference@nysoclib.org)

Access: Full access for members; public access to collections onsite and most events

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/nysoclib>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/nysoclib>

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/user/nysoclib>

Transportation: No. 6 train to 77th Street; bus line 1, 2, 3, or 4 to 79th Street

Early in this project, I was impressed with the fact that I would be covering two libraries that were almost 200 years old. Later I would find out to my great surprise that a third library had already celebrated its 250 birthday. The New York Society Library, founded in 1754, needed a charter from King George III to begin its enterprise.



Library main entrance.

Owing to a bizarre mix-up with e-mail, I was not able to reach them until one day before my visit, but they were very generous with their time, given the short notice. I first spoke with Carolyn Waters, Assistant Head Librarian, who was working the reference desk when I came in. She began to fill me in on the illustrious history of this library, which is the fifth oldest in America. It has been in continuous operation, except for a hiatus during the Revolutionary War. Afterward, when New York emerged as the capitol of the new country, its membership included a Who's Who of founding fathers: John Jay and John Adams were members. Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr were both members, but probably did not use the library at the same time. The library is particularly proud of something they found in

their old circulation records—a notation of a book being checked out by George Washington.

Obviously, my standard question about which celebrity had used the library was completely absurd here. Washington Irving and Clement Moore were trustees, and members included John James Audubon, Herman Melville, and Willa Cather. In the case of Melville, he had checked out a book covering Arctic regions and whale fishing prior to writing *Moby-Dick*. In their 2004 book *The New York Society Library: 250 Years*, there are testimonials from Arthur Schlesinger, Jacques Barzun, Susan Cheever, Dominick Dunne, and Wendy Wasserstein. Ralph Waldo Emerson was not a member, but he was a featured speaker here.

The library has resided at its current location since 1937, when the library retrofitted the 1917 John S. Rogers mansion, which is now a New York City landmark. The original location was in City Hall, and the library spent more than 80 years on University Place. I was taken on a tour of the building, courtesy of Sara Holliday, Events Coordinator and Head Librarian's Assistant. I learned that the library has 300,000 volumes and that they are kept in Dewey order. I also complimented them on maintaining their records in an Innovative Interfaces catalog, as this is the sure sign of a prosperous library.

We started with the reference room on the first floor. It is notable for that twentieth century library staple—a card catalog. It is still accurate, but has not been fed for some time. This is the portion of the library that is available to all interested citizens, and it contains a basic ready reference collection of things like dictionaries and encyclopedias. The circulation desk was already humming with business from people who could afford the \$320 family membership fee—a full list of membership options can be found on their Web site. These fees, plus an endowment, are the principal means of support for the library. As we made our way through the floors I saw a thriving Children's Library. Just past that on the third floor there is a members-only reading room for people who really need peace and quiet. The larger members-only reading room is on the second floor. The fourth floor is a staff-only area and the fifth floor has a section with six private rooms devoted to working authors. We tiptoed through the halls here to confirm that serious concentration was going on behind closed doors.



Members-only reading room.

The author rooms have a mythology all their own. Wendy Wasserstein claimed that she wrote almost all of *The Heidi Chronicles* on 79th Street. Other modern authors in the corral include Roald Dahl, Leonard Bernstein, Lewis Mumford, Edward Gorey, P.G. Wodehouse, Barbara Tuchman, Brendan Gill (who also served as a trustee), and Willa Cather. This is one very proud institution. Yet, I had to admit that when I began the list of target libraries I was unaware of the library. Holliday admitted that it is not as well known as they would like it to be, so they welcomed efforts like mine to spread the word.

I met Mark Bartlett, the Head Librarian, and we exchanged cards in his office overlooking 79th Street. Then Holliday and I moved on to the upper floors. These are all members-only spaces, and the main one looks like the nineteenth century Parisian reading rooms of your dreams. Also on the second floor we saw the current exhibition of books with extra writing on their pages—at the hands of famous authors. I gravitated to a copy of George Bernard Shaw's *Too True to Be Good*, significant because, even though it was a minor play, it featured his friend T.E. Lawrence as a thinly disguised character. This was a sample from a Special Collections Department containing more than 12,000 rare books.

An old friend of mine from New York University mentioned that, after she retires, she wants to volunteer at The New York Society Library. I told her that she had chosen well.

## GENERAL SOCIETY OF MECHANICS AND TRADESMEN LIBRARY

Address: 20 West 44th Street, New York, NY 10036

URL: [http://generalsociety.org/?page\\_id=103](http://generalsociety.org/?page_id=103)

Facebook: [https://www.facebook.com/pages/General-Society-Library/238365909558261?ref=br\\_tf](https://www.facebook.com/pages/General-Society-Library/238365909558261?ref=br_tf)

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/generalsociety>

E-mail: [info@generalsociety.org](mailto:info@generalsociety.org)

Access: Open to members for a nominal fee

Transportation: Bus—No. 3 or 4 Madison or 5th; subway—B, D, F, or M to Bryant Park

One day early in the project, I was early for an appointment to a Midtown library, and I noticed that the General Society Library was just a block away, so I took a chance and dropped in on them. The security guard told me that they were closed at the moment, but said I should talk to Karin Taylor upstairs. I did go up and introduced myself and explained the project. When I had first thought of this book, I was impressed and surprised that there were subscription libraries still going after more than 150 years, so this library was particularly important to me. Karin was immediately supportive, going so far as to open up the reading room below and giving me access to take pictures of this wonderful old building.

Several weeks later I came back for my official visit, talking with Society Executive Director Victoria Dengel as well as Karin. We sat at a long hardwood table underneath a bust of Andrew Carnegie, and they filled me in on a history that encompassed four centuries. The Society was founded in 1785 to help with the working conditions and general welfare of young tradesmen and their families. The library came along in 1820 to help with the self-education of workers who could never afford traditional higher education, and evolved over the years into a general circulating library. The library followed a traditional pattern of moves—beginning in Lower Manhattan and eventually occupying its current building in 1899, with a generous assist from General Society member Andrew Carnegie.

I asked them a standard question about which famous person had used their library and got a wealth of responses, starting with the notables who had given speeches to the organization. These included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horace Greeley, and Admiral Robert Peary. Library members included Isaac Asimov and Garrison Keillor. The Old World charm of the building has led to using the facility for filming, and one notable guest for



this purpose was Robin Williams. “He had a star trailer parked in front, but he spent a lot of time looking in the library and asking questions,” remembers Dengel. Walking through the building later, I was shown the Members Assembly room that had been used in filming the Robin Williams movie.



Main reading room of the Society Library.

They told me that there are about 100,000 volumes in the collection, including their legacy collection of pre-1923 volumes. The year 1923 is famous for being the cutoff year for public domain—anything older can be digitized and shared without fear. I asked, but was told that digitization plans are not on their immediate radar. Also they have a major collection of fiction from 1923 to 1950. The earliest books still use a classification scheme devised by the Society's librarian at the turn of the twentieth century. More modern titles are now arranged in Library of Congress order. In modern times, the library was given ownership of the Crouse Library for Publishing Arts. The online catalog is run on a system called Softlink.



The John M. Mossman Lock Collection.

The collection the Society is most proud of is on the top floor, overlooking the reading room. It is the John M. Mossman Lock Museum, containing locks dating back to 4000 BC and extending to modern safe locks. On the wall past the locks are the portraits of past presidents of the Society. One of them is Victoria Dengel's father, which helps to explain how this organization is in her DNA. I asked them where they send researchers to lunch and was told that the Red Flame is the eatery of choice for its quality and variety. If users are in a hurry then they are directed to several delis on 43rd Street.



Society banner over the reading room.

A few months later, my wife and I were honored to attend an event celebrating artisanship and the founding of the Society by 22 craftsmen 230 years ago. The General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen of the City of New York continues to honor its original theme, By Hammer and Hand All Arts Do Stand. And that night they declared the Society “The Home of the Artisan.” The crowd was a prosperous-looking group of people, young and old, who were getting things done in New York City. The evening included remarks by architect Peter Pennoyer and Master Artisan Jean Wiart. Dengel got up to speak, and it is clear that she has every intention of steering the society toward its 250th anniversary in good stead.

## **LIBRARY: THE CENTER FOR FICTION**

Address: 17 East 47th Street, New York, NY

URL: <http://www.centerforfiction.org/>

Telephone: (212) 755-6710

E-mail: [info@centerforfiction.org](mailto:info@centerforfiction.org)

Access: Basic membership \$150; otherwise limited access to the public

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/thecenterforfiction>

Twitter: @Center4Fiction

The Center for Fiction began as the Mercantile Library and has been retooled in modern times as a nonprofit educational institution. Like the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen, it began library operations in 1820.



The Center is located in Midtown, just east of the Diamond District. If you are not paying close attention to the street numbers, it is easy to walk right past it—I know, because I did. The entry to the Center looks like a used book store, but the real treasures for book lovers are on the higher floors, which only members may access.

I met Matt Nelson, the library manager, who was quick to point out that he is not a trained librarian. On the other hand, he spends his time away from the center running something called the Gentle Pages, a subscription library in Brooklyn that has a core membership of 500 subscribers. Nelson promises that the Center will hire a librarian in the near future to lead the institution through some major changes. Judging by the highly positive reviews on Yelp, Nelson was doing just fine.

By this time, I had ascended in every type of elevator imaginable, but the Center has an elevator car with catalog cards and newspaper clippings as floor-to-ceiling wallpaper, so you cannot help but be in the spirit. On the second floor there is an elegant reading room with a view to 47th Street.



Center for Fiction Reading Room.

Higher up, we found the book stacks. As the Center's name would suggest, the main menu item here is fiction (particularly mysteries and suspense), but there is some nonfiction and that is kept in Dewey order. I was told that the catalog is run on Follett software, which is PC based.



A floor of the Center for Fiction provides members with work space for writing.

In its almost 200-year history, the Center has seen its share of famous authors. I was told that Edgar Allen Poe and Mark Twain were part of the story, but the 47th Street location has been used only since 1930. The page of videos showing recent programs is fairly impressive as well, with contributions by Elmore Leonard and Joyce Carol Oates. Nelson is particularly proud of the Center's association with author Gordon Lish, who is also an editor and a teacher of writing, known for his boot-camp tactics.

## FURTHER READING

Atlas Obscura article about the Mossman Lock Collection: <http://www.atlasobscura.com/places/john-m-mossman-lock-collection>.

Behind the scenes at the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen: <http://untappedcities.com/2013/07/10/behind-the-scenes-at-the-general-society-of-mechanics-tradesmen-the-second-oldest-library-in-nyc/>.

Crouse Library for Publishing Arts: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crouse\\_Library\\_for\\_Publishing\\_Arts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crouse_Library_for_Publishing_Arts).

Guardian article about George Washington's overdue books: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/apr/18/george-washington-library-new-york>.

Hidden Libraries of New York City: <http://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/secret-libraries-of-new-york-city>.

Interview with architect Peter Pennoyer: <http://newyorkyimby.com/2014/04/interview-with-the-architect-peter-pennoyer.html>.

- Interview with Gordon Lish: <http://www.thegiganticmag.com/magazine/articleDetail.php?p=articleDetail&id=108>.
- New York Review of Books article about exhibit at the New York Society Library of books with handwritten notes by famous authors: <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/gallery/2015/feb/19/marginalia-insults-epiphanies/>.
- New York Times article: [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/07/realestate/07streets.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/07/realestate/07streets.html?_r=0).
- Videos of past programs at the Center for fiction: <http://www.centerforfiction.org/audiovideo/video/>.
- Wikipedia article about the New York Society Library: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_York\\_Society\\_Library](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_Society_Library).
- Yelp review of Center for Fiction: <http://www.yelp.com/biz/the-center-for-fiction-new-york-2>.
- Zoominfo page about Victoria Dengel: <http://www.zoominfo.com/p/Victoria-Dengel/1160509024>.