**‘Very Useful as well as Ornamental’: Social Libraries in Early American Communities[[1]](#endnote-1)**

**Abstract**:

*Responding to previous analyses of eighteenth-century subscription libraries which focus primarily on the ‘useful’ – namely, access to books – this article instead considers the ‘ornamental’ aspects of library membership. Taking the colony of New York as a case study, it explores the ways in which the members of disparate, individual proprietary libraries were active participants in a broader, Atlantic-wide social movement, balancing elements of politeness, sociability and an emerging civic society with the practical quest for the acquisition of knowledge. Primarily comprising an analysis of the early records of the New York Society Library, this article forms a prosopographical study of the library’s membership before the American Revolution, before exploring the social, commercial and familial connections between members. It ultimately concludes that early American social libraries both shaped and were shaped by the communities which they served, and highlights the potential of biographical approaches to library history for enhancing current understandings of early American communities.* (154 words)

**Keywords:**

Subscription libraries; early America; New York; sociability; civic society; prosopography.

In 1788, the Directors of the Union Library in Hatborough, Pennsylvania, reflected on the success and longevity of their social library, which had been founded in 1755. They claimed that:

Amongst the various methods designed for promoting knowledge, no one appears better adapted to that important end than a public Library. An institution of this kind is so generous and extensive in its nature, that it affords instruction on the most easy terms to all who are desirous of improvement.[[2]](#endnote-2)

In the three decades since its inception, the Hatborough library had endured and survived the upheaval of the American revolutionary war – a fate not always shared by similar colonial institutions – and expanded its collections significantly.[[3]](#endnote-3) In their small corner of Pennsylvania, located twenty miles north of the bustling city of Philadelphia, Hatborough’s Directors boasted that their library catered for all literary tastes, ranging from ‘the opulent friend to learning’ to ‘the genius’.[[4]](#endnote-4) For these men and their contemporaries, knowledge was the key to improvement and social libraries played a crucial role in fulfilling this ambition. Thus, they concluded that ‘when men must possess the means of being acquainted with the arts and sciences, it may justly be expected that important enquiries will be prosecuted, and the good of society increased.’[[5]](#endnote-5)

Social libraries – or, subscription libraries, as they are known interchangeably in British and Canadian historiography – occupy a special place in studies of eighteenth-century polite society.[[6]](#endnote-6) These voluntary associations, which were jointly owned by shareholders (sometimes called proprietors) and maintained by the payment of annual subscriptions, are often cited as indicators of the socio-cultural development of eighteenth-century towns. In his influential essay from 1977, Peter Borsay hailed the English subscription library as an important example of the development of leisure facilities, which was a key stage in his methodological framework for tracing a so-called ‘urban renaissance’.[[7]](#endnote-7) Four decades later, Borsay’s approach remains influential.[[8]](#endnote-8) As recently as 2018, John Hinks and Catherine Armstrong reiterated the continued relevance and utility of Borsay’s ‘urban renaissance’, extending his methodological framework beyond England to studies of the wider British Isles and Europe.[[9]](#endnote-9)

While social libraries were undoubtedly important to the social and cultural development of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, it is important to stress that they were an American, rather than an English, innovation. The first library established using the subscription model was the Library Company of Philadelphia, co-founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1731. Whether or not Franklin’s bold assertion, written in 1791, that the Library Company was ‘the Mother of all North American Subscription Libraries’ holds strictly true, during the 1740s and 1750s a series of similarly-organised subscription libraries emerged along the north-eastern Atlantic seaboard, before spreading to the British Isles.[[10]](#endnote-10) Libraries based upon subscription were first established in the west of Scotland in the 1740s.[[11]](#endnote-11) In England, meanwhile, the first subscription library was not established until 1758, when the burgeoning middle classes in the Atlantic-facing trading port of Liverpool, sensible that ‘many Kinds of useful and polite Knowledge can no otherwise be acquired than by Reading’, devised a scheme to ‘promote the Advantage of Knowledge’ by establishing a library there.[[12]](#endnote-12)

In British North America, social libraries were established by a range of disparate communities, for an assortment of reasons. These include the Byberry Library Company and Library Company of Burlington, both founded by Quaker communities in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, respectively; the New York Society Library, founded in opposition to the dominance of the Anglican Church in education in New York City; and the Niagara Library, founded by loyalist refugees in Canada as an exercise in nation- and community-building. Libraries were formed in prosperous, Atlantic-facing port towns such as Charleston and Baltimore, but were also found in more humble, rural communities in New England, upstate New York and the Pennsylvania hinterlands.[[13]](#endnote-13) Despite their disparate origins, the charters and records of early American social libraries reveal a shared ambition: the advancement of ‘useful’ and ‘improving’ knowledge.

Their founders’ hopes that such institutions would be ‘useful’ notwithstanding, early American social libraries, like their counterparts in Britain, were not solely concerned with education and the acquisition of knowledge. Beyond access to books, library members also gained admission to a broad scope of social activities including debates, balls, and annual dinners. Upon joining a social library, new members were also brought into contact with a range of new acquaintances, which presented their own opportunities for business and social advancement.[[14]](#endnote-14) Responding to previous analyses of eighteenth-century social (or subscription) libraries which focus primarily on the ‘useful’ – namely, access to books – this article instead considers the ‘ornamental’ aspects of library membership. More specifically, it evaluates the role of social libraries in early American towns as places for polite sociability, identity construction and community building. Taking the colony of New York as a case study, it explores the ways in which these disparate, individual proprietary libraries – found in both urban centres and also in more rural communities – were active participants in broader, Atlantic-wide processes of politeness and sociability.

In contrast to other studies which have explored the post-war history of the New York Society Library (hereafter NYSL) within the new republic of the United States, this article focuses specifically on the library’s incorporation and earliest years, thus building upon the foundation laid by Austin Baxter Keep’s classic, although outdated, study from 1908.[[15]](#endnote-15) Primarily comprising an analysis of the early records of the NYSL – including its membership lists, rule books, royal charter and catalogues – this article supplements these institutional records with additional contemporary material such as newspaper reports, wills and obituaries to first form a prosopographical study of the library’s membership before the American Revolution, before exploring the social, commercial and familial connections between them. In doing so, this article not only reveals the profile of a typical library member, but also demonstrates how New York’s unique history as a Dutch colony and its subsequent heterogeneous character shaped this particular community of readers, ultimately concluding that early American social libraries both shaped and were shaped by the communities which they served. Finally, this article highlights the potential of large-scale digital humanities initiatives – such as the project which underpins this research – for informing future investigations into early American communities.

**The Establishment of Early American Social Libraries**

In the late 1720s, Benjamin Franklin and his fellow members of their debating society, ‘The Junto’ (formed in 1727), encountered a problem. Their conversations were dependent upon contemporary texts; however, it became apparent that not all members had equal access to the same books. As the Junto’s membership was drawn from a range of socio-economic backgrounds – including clerks, shoemakers and joiners alongside surveyors, inventors and men of independent means – it was not possible for all of the members to simply purchase the books already held by the others.[[16]](#endnote-16) In order to resolve the matter, Franklin proposed that the members’ books should be conveniently held together in the Junto’s meeting place – which he described as being ‘not at a tavern, but in a little room of [fellow Junto-member] Mr. [Robert] Grace’s, set apart for that purpose’ – so that they could be consulted as and when they were required. According to Franklin, ‘by thus clubbing our books to a common library, we should … have each of us the advantage of using the books of all the other members, which would be nearly as beneficial as if each owned the whole.’[[17]](#endnote-17)

However, this first informal arrangement proved unsatisfactory. The number of books assembled was fewer than the Junto had hoped for and, for want of care, several of the texts became damaged. The library was disassembled within a year and each member took their respective books home again. The failure of the Junto’s first private library encouraged Franklin to devise plans for a more formal library model: the Library Company of Philadelphia. Established in 1731, fifty subscribers pledged an initial payment of forty shillings each, followed by an annual subscription of ten shillings per year for fifty years.[[18]](#endnote-18) In contrast to the Junto’s earlier attempt, which relied on donations, members of the Library Company of Philadelphia pooled their financial resources to purchase books, of which they would be joint owners. Subscription payments were used to order books, to hire and fit out suitable premises to hold the collection, and to pay the salary for a librarian.

The subscription-based organisational model introduced by the Library Company of Philadelphia was replicated in a series of similar libraries founded across British North America. By 1766, there were four social libraries in Philadelphia alone, plus one in almost every notable Pennsylvania town.[[19]](#endnote-19) Meanwhile, the most reliable figures available for New England indicate that at least fifty-one social libraries were established there between 1733 and 1780.[[20]](#endnote-20) As James Raven highlights, these libraries were of an ambiguous nature: they were privately owned by a clearly defined group of subscribers and accessible only to them and those who they deemed to be suitable; however, the libraries were considered to be ‘public’ in the eighteenth-century sense of the word, distinct from the ‘private’ libraries that individuals may keep at their respective homes.[[21]](#endnote-21) They also shared a common structural organisation and mode of operation: individuals pledged funds to purchase books, appointed a librarian to care for the collection, and elected officers who were responsible for the quotidian operation of the library. The responsibilities of these ‘Directors’ – or ‘Trustees’, as they were sometimes known – included deciding which books to acquire, establishing rules and hours for borrowing, and procuring suitable premises in which the collection could be safely held. As the century progressed, some libraries employed London-based agents to ensure that the latest and most fashionable books were purchased.[[22]](#endnote-22) According to Franklin, these early American social libraries were successful in ‘improv[ing] the general conversation of the Americans, [and] made the common tradesmen and farmers as intelligent as most gentlemen from other countries.’[[23]](#endnote-23)

The social libraries outlined above met a real and pressing need in the American colonies. Individuals were conscious that they needed to read books, whether this was for commercial and personal education, religious instruction, to keep informed of agricultural improvements, or simply for entertainment purposes. However, books were expensive, few in number, and difficult to obtain.[[24]](#endnote-24) With only limited re-printing in North America before 1770, books were primarily purchased and imported from England. Not only was this costly, but American consumers who strove to obtain the latest books were dependent upon what Richard Sher describes as the ‘slow, uncertain nature of transatlantic importing’, subject to the maritime dangers associated with piracy, war, and inclement weather.[[25]](#endnote-25) Importing texts from England carried an additional unanticipated hazard, as savvy British merchants used the American colonies as what Maxine Berg terms a ‘dumping ground’ for outdated stock. As Raven highlights, this practice was especially common amongst London booksellers seeking to offload poor sellers. [[26]](#endnote-26)

Before the establishment of social libraries, those who needed books frequently borrowed them from those who had them, such as ministers, landlords or other prestigious people within their communities. Stocks of books were also kept at taverns or general stores, and these could be loaned out to the public.[[27]](#endnote-27) Under the direction of Thomas Bray and the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK), a series of lending libraries were founded in the American colonies, including the parochial library founded at New York’s Trinity Parish in 1698 which remained under the close control of the Rector.[[28]](#endnote-28) Meanwhile, a separate ‘Publick Library’ was to be established at New York in 1730, under the auspices of the Society for Propagating the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPGFP): the Revd. Dr John Millington, Rector at Stoke Newington, had bequeathed his personal library to the SPGFP, who in turn sent the books to the New York Corporation. While the ‘Corporation Library’ (as it would later be known) was described as ‘Publick’, instructions from the SPGFP designated that it was primarily for the use of gentlemen and clergy from New York and its neighbouring colonies of New Jersey, Philadelphia, and Connecticut.[[29]](#endnote-29) Despite Bray and the SPGFP’s intentions that such libraries would provide a mixture of religious and secular content, to allow for a well-rounded education for ministers, by the mid-eighteenth century the collections of these libraries were considered to be too outdated and overwhelmingly theological to support the informed discussion that Franklin and his contemporaries increasingly sought.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Beyond simply providing access to books, social libraries were venues of polite sociability. Whether they enjoyed a permanent space or were what Mark Towsey and Kyle Roberts describe as ‘virtual’ – held in rooms within private houses or taverns – they were places where like-minded individuals could gather to talk about the books that they had read, the texts that they felt were important for consolidating their gentlemanly status, and to urge the library committee to purchase such texts.[[31]](#endnote-31) As we shall see from the example of the NYSL, they were also places in which members could develop or indeed strengthen nascent business and inter-personal connections. In heterogeneous colonial societies, libraries also drew together members of different nationalities, religious denominations, and political orientations. Thus, as Ross Beales and James Green contend, in many instances they truly were ‘a space where civic, religious, and commercial values overlapped.’[[32]](#endnote-32)

While the limitations of the surviving material (and the level of detail recorded in library minute books) mean that we may never know the exact nature of the conversations that took place within subscription libraries, contemporary anecdotal descriptions indicate that reading was a social activity. An anonymous contributor to the New York *Royal Gazette* in 1780 described the practice of reading at the coffee-house, outlining how he ‘overlooked several persons in the neighbouring boxes who had other papers in their hands, reading aloud to their acquaintance, such articles of Advertisements or intelligence as struck them.’[[33]](#endnote-33) Markman Ellis’s work on coffee-house libraries similarly emphasises the social aspect of reading in the eighteenth century. Not only did readers read text aloud to each other, but they repeated lines and learned them by heart. As Ellis explains, in reading aloud individuals invited comments from others. Other patrons might openly disagree with their interpretation of the text, but this criticism was a sociable activity: people disagreed with each other in a way that was perceived as being entertaining and good-humoured.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Responding to the lack of a suitable public library within the city, in 1754 William Smith Junior – along with his business partners William Livingston and John Morrin Scott – established the New York Society Library. The timing of its inception was important, as King’s College (now Columbia) had also been proposed in the same year, and the library’s co-founders claimed that in addition to being ‘very useful, as well as ornamental to this City’ the library ‘may be also advantageous to our intended College’.[[35]](#endnote-35) However, according to Tom Glynn, one of the aims of the NYSL’s founders was to counteract what they perceived to be the Anglican dominance of the College’s proposed university library.[[36]](#endnote-36) The regulations and procedures outlined in the 1754 call for subscriptions indicate that the NYSL replicated the subscription model introduced at the Library Company of Philadelphia. Twelve trustees were to be elected on an annual basis who were responsible for purchasing the necessary books, procuring a house or room, and appointing a salaried librarian to administer them.[[37]](#endnote-37)

One hundred and three individuals answered the NYSL’s call for subscriptions in 1754, each paying an initial amount of five pounds New York Currency, to be followed by an annual charge of 10*s.* Initial subscriptions raised £600 and, while Smith’s claim that this was used to purchase 7,000 ‘new, well-chosen Books’ seems implausible, the NYSL’s charter indicates that through these subscriptions ‘the Library was become very considerable.’[[38]](#endnote-38) A further eighteen members had joined the NYSL by the time that the first known surviving catalogue was printed in 1758, while just three of the original subscribers had allowed their membership to lapse. In a curious detail that would later become commonplace at the NYSL, the names of seven individuals are recorded within the 1758 membership records, despite being deceased.[[39]](#endnote-39) The reason for their inclusion is unclear. It may simply be indicative that they had paid their subscriptions up to and including 1758. However, the elevated status of the members in question – all of whom were politicians, colonial officials, and prominent merchants – suggests that their inclusion on the membership list carried an element of prestige.

Like many social libraries of the period, the NYSL did not enjoy its own purpose-built premises. Instead, the library’s collections were kept at City Hall, in the same library room occupied by the older Corporation Library introduced above. Located on Wall Street in the heart of the town, Smith described City Hall as ‘a strong Brick Building, two Stories in Height, in the Shape of an Oblong.’[[40]](#endnote-40) The NYSL’s annual meetings, meanwhile, took place at various locations across the city, including the Exchange coffee-house on Broad Street, the City Arms, and Fraunces’s Tavern.[[41]](#endnote-41) Not only did the NYSL and Corporation libraries share the same physical space, but from 1765 they also shared the same ‘keeper’ – schoolmaster Thomas Jackson – and the same hours of operation. Although access to the NYSL required subscription, non-members were permitted to borrow from the collection at an additional charge.[[42]](#endnote-42) Thus, the library room was simultaneously public and private: City Hall was a public space, potentially open to all for reading and polite conversation; however, access to the most recent titles remained exclusive, dependent upon library membership or the ability to pay to borrow.

This method of organisation was typical of contemporary social libraries both in England and North America: the Library Company of Philadelphia was initially housed at the librarian’s dwellings, before moving to the Statehouse in 1742; while the Charleston Library Society was contained in a number of different houses and taverns before moving to the city’s courthouse in 1792.[[43]](#endnote-43) Across the Atlantic, Liverpool’s first subscription library was initially housed within a coffee-house and a hotel, before eventually moving to the purpose-built Lyceum in 1802; while the collections of the Bristol subscription library were initially contained alongside that of the corporation.[[44]](#endnote-44) By Jackson’s own account, the New York library room was described as ‘convenient’ and appropriately ‘fitted up.’[[45]](#endnote-45) In 1771, the collection of a rival social library – the short-lived Union Library Company of New York – would also be installed at City Hall.[[46]](#endnote-46) Although the NYSL was granted a Royal Charter in 1772 and sought to procure separate premises, the colonial incarnation served its purpose until 1795, when the NYSL eventually moved to a purpose-built location on Nassau Street.[[47]](#endnote-47)

Perhaps encouraged by the success of the NYSL a few years earlier, Albany’s residents also made efforts in 1758 to establish a subscription library there.[[48]](#endnote-48) The mode of operation outlined in the call for subscribers suggests that, just as provincial towns in England and Scotland often looked to their nearest city for inspiration, Albany looked to New York and not Philadelphia.[[49]](#endnote-49) The broadside which advertised the call for subscriptions was almost a complete replica of the NYSL’s, while the library was to operate on a near identical model to its counterpart in New York. Subscriptions were based on the same financial terms, while ten trustees (rather than the twelve at New York) were to be elected on an annual basis to oversee the daily operation of the library, enjoying identical responsibilities to their equivalents at the NYSL. The main difference between the two libraries was the Albany Library’s stipulation that clergymen could not become trustees, and therefore, could not influence the purchases of books.[[50]](#endnote-50) As was the case at the NYSL, members at Albany were required to leave a cash deposit of at least one-third of the value of any books borrowed. While this initially seems unfeasible in a largely rural and cash-poor community, it compares favourably with contemporary practice at the Library Company of Burlington and the Union Library Company of Philadelphia, where subscribers were required to leave notes of surety to cover at least the minimum value of the book, if not more.[[51]](#endnote-51)

While the call for subscribers was successful and the Albany Society Library was established in 1758, very little is known of its operation, as no further membership lists, catalogues or borrowing records survive. Indeed, the only evidence we have for its existence comes from examples of its 1759 bookplates.[[52]](#endnote-52) (Fig. 1) The library evidently endured the upheaval of American Revolution in Albany County, later being absorbed by the Albany Library (incorporated in 1792) in 1793. A portion of the original collection is believed to survive at the New York State Library.[[53]](#endnote-53) [Figure 1 near here]

**Analysis: The Founding Members of the New York Society Library**

In order to more deeply understand the origins and importance of these pioneering early American social libraries, it is essential to uncover more information concerning their initial supporters and users; namely, the library members. The remainder of this article turns to consider the earliest known members of the NYSL, those whose names were printed on a 1754 broadside which listed the library’s subscribers.[[54]](#endnote-54) Forming an analysis of the library’s earliest supporters, it reveals distinct trends, similarities, and personal connections that can be observed between them. This analysis is underpinned by the detailed prosopographical and biographical research being undertaken by the author as part of the AHRC-funded project *Libraries, Reading Communities and Cultural Formation in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic,* and illustrates the potential of such approaches for informing future bibliographical projects.[[55]](#endnote-55)

First, and most striking, all one hundred and three members shared two common characteristics: they were all of legal age (twenty-one and above) and they were all male. This profile was not unusual for similar contemporary colonial libraries and reflected the patriarchal nature of the mid-eighteenth century British Atlantic.[[56]](#endnote-56) Of the sixty-eight members (66%) for whom their birth date can be determined, their ages upon joining the library ranged from twenty-one years old to eighty-seven. The NYSL’s youngest member, James Duane (1733-1797), would in later life become a prominent lawyer and leader of the American Revolution in New York; however, in 1754 he was the orphaned son of Irish Royal Navy officer Anthony Duane and Althea Ketaltas (of the wealthy Dutch family), and the ward of fellow library member Robert Livingston, the third Lord of Livingston Manor. Captain Paul Richard (1667-1756), meanwhile, the eldest founding member of the library, was one of the most prominent merchants and citizens of New York.

For those members whose age can be determined, a slight majority (thirty-six individuals, or 53%) – including co-founders and instigators William Smith Junior, John Morrin Scott and William Livingston – were young men in their twenties and thirties. A further seventeen men (25%) were aged between forty and fifty years, bringing the average age firmly below fifty (forty years). A further eight members (12%) – including Smith’s father, the eminent lawyer William Smith, and Livingston’s uncle Robert Livingston of Claremont – were aged under sixty, while six members (9%) were aged between sixty and seventy years old, with Richard a lone octogenarian.

Considering the matter of legal age first, social libraries were founded on the basis that members would be joint tenants – meaning that each subscriber owned an equal share – rather than as tenants in common. As such, subscribers needed to be legally entitled to hold property. While similar contemporary institutions made provision for minors to access the library – such as the Juliana Library Company in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, which permitted the heirs of members aged fourteen years and over to use the library – this was dependent upon a legal guardian maintaining the annual subscriptions.[[57]](#endnote-57) Similarly, members who inherited their shares whilst underage were exempt from their shares being forfeited upon failure to pay their annual subscriptions. However, the regulations of the Library Company of Bridge-Town at Mount Holly, New Jersey, made it explicitly clear that, upon reaching twenty-one years of age, such individuals were required to pay any outstanding balances and fines should they choose to accept the share.[[58]](#endnote-58)

With this in mind, although the NYSL’s printed regulations did not stipulate gender as a precondition of membership, it is unsurprising that the early membership was exclusively male. Under the English legal practice of couverture, women’s wealth and property became subsumed by their husbands upon marriage.[[59]](#endnote-59) This practice was commonplace in colonial New York by the mid-eighteenth century, as attempts to ‘Anglicise’ the province in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries witnessed the adoption of the English model of common law.[[60]](#endnote-60) Within this context, as it was unusual for colonial women to be property-holders, it was unlikely for them to become subscribers in joint-stock library companies. While Jennifer Furlong rightly notes that the NYSL’s membership did include women, this was primarily during the post-war period of the early Republic, during which the Library actively sought to expand its membership in order to raise additional funds and increase the city’s prestige, as New York competed with Philadelphia to become the capital of the United States.[[61]](#endnote-61) The first – and only – female member to be admitted to the NYSL before the American War of Independence was Anne Waddell, the widow of library member Captain John Waddell, a ship’s commander and merchant.[[62]](#endnote-62)

For those NYSL members whose main places of operation are known (seventy-four individuals, or 72%), the overwhelming majority (sixty-eight members, or 92%) were resident in the city and county of New York, or its immediate surrounding environs of Queens and Kings Counties on Long Island. Their homes and business addresses were spread across the city’s wards, including Broadway (West Ward), Dock Street (Dock Ward), Hanover Square, Queen Street, the Fly Market and Meal Market (East Ward), and Wall Street and King Street (North Ward). The central location of the Library on Wall Street and the members’ proximity to it suggests of its centrality to civic and public life within the city.

As stipulated in the call for subscribers, however, membership was open to anybody who resided in the colony. Considering those who resided further afield: land speculator James Emott lived on the ‘Great Nine Partners’ patent – of which he was one of the ‘partners’ – in Dutchess County; brothers Richard and Lewis Morris lived in Westchester County, which was the seat of their family estate, ‘Morrisania’; while David Johnson was of Perth-Amboy in nearby New Jersey. Eight individual members of the prestigious Livingston family – including the NYSL’s co-founder William Livingston – were listed on the membership list of 1754; two of whom – Robert Livingston, the Lord of Livingston Manor, and Robert Livingston of Claremont – both resided at Livingston Manor in Albany County. Meanwhile, John Livingston – a merchant and trader who operated between New York, Albany and Montréal – was the only member to reside in the city of Albany, where he had previously been an Alderman.

Besides being adult males who predominantly resided in the city of New York, further analysis of the biographical data reveals that the NYSL’s founding members had few other characteristics in common. Instead, they represented a cross-section of New York’s uniquely heterogeneous colonial society. In contrast to the other British colonies in North America, New York was originally founded under the jurisdiction of another European power and political rival, the Netherlands. Under the direction of the Dutch East India Company as the ‘New Netherlands’, significant levels of migration to the two main settlements of New Amsterdam (later New York City) and Beverwijck (later Albany) occurred during the 1620s. The colony would not fall under English (later British, after the Act of Union in 1707) rule until 1664, when Charles II gifted the territory to his brother, the Duke of York (James II).[[63]](#endnote-63)

Although migration from England had increased since the Duke of York’s acquisition of the colony, New York’s seventeenth-century population was still predominantly – although not solely – Dutch. During the latter years of the century New York had provided refuge for large numbers of Protestant French Huguenots who were fleeing from persecution and forced conversion to Catholicism under the reign of Louis XIV. Meanwhile, a smaller but still sizeable Jewish community also called New York their home.[[64]](#endnote-64) Consequently, as late as 1692, New York City mayor Charles Lodwick expressed his concern that the city contained ‘too great a mixture of nations and English the least part.’[[65]](#endnote-65)

The demographic composition of New York’s inhabitants changed significantly during the early eighteenth century; largely as a consequence of hostile Anglicisation policies introduced by successive colonial governors which elevated the status of English colonists.[[66]](#endnote-66) However, by the time of the incorporation of the NYSL in 1754, the colonial population still reflected the diverse ethnic origins of its original settlers. Similar patterns of demographic heterogeneity are mirrored within the earliest membership lists. The NYSL’s first members were drawn from a series of differing nationalities, including English, Dutch, Irish, German, Scottish, Welsh, and French Huguenot.[[67]](#endnote-67) Several were American-born, and even second- and third-generation members of prestigious settler families including the De Lanceys, Philipses, and Van Cortlandts; others were recent migrants to New York, ranging from colonial officials such as Goldsbrow Banyar, Archibald Kennedy, and Peter Wraxall, to merchants and mariners such as Sanky Hainsworth and James Jauncey.

Reflecting their diverse ethnic origins, the NYSL’s membership was drawn from the city’s various religious denominations. Despite its founders’ supposed intentions to reduce the dominance of the Anglican church in New York, several of the library’s members are known to have been Anglicans, including the Reverends Henry Barcley, the rector of New York’s Trinity Church, and Samuel Achmuty, who accepted the Trinity rectorship upon Barcley’s death in 1764. James Emott and merchant Gabriel Ludlow had both served as vestrymen at Trinity Church prior to joining the library, while attorney Richard Nicolls was Trinity’s clerk in 1752. Other NYSL members were drawn from the Dutch Reformed Church, Episcopalian, and Presbyterian congregations. Whitehead Hicks – lawyer and future Mayor of New York – was a Quaker, while slave trader and merchant Jacob Franks was a member of one of New York’s most prominent Jewish families.

This level of religious diversity seems to have been largely distinct to New York; it is certainly not echoed amongst the membership records of other contemporary early American libraries examined to date. It is again reflective of New York’s socio-cultural composition. While Anglicisation laws of the 1690s and 1700s established the Church of England as the official church of the American colonies, in practice Anglicans formed a minority in New York.[[68]](#endnote-68) To protect Anglicans from the majority Dutch Reformed population, a 1691 law outlined that New Yorkers could not be ‘molested, punished, disturbed, or called into question for any Difference in Opinion, or matter of Religious Concernment’ and that all Protestants were allowed to ‘freely meet at convenient Places … and there Worship according to their respective Persuasions, without being hindered or molested’.[[69]](#endnote-69) In so stipulating, the act permitted religious diversity and encouraged toleration of non-Anglican denominations. Notably, these rights were not extended to Catholics; as the act explained, this would have been ‘contrary to the Laws and Statutes of their Majesties Kingdom of England.’ Consequently, with the exception of Eliza Ann Bayley Seton – the first American-born Catholic saint – who was briefly a member in 1793, there are no known Catholics amongst the NYSL’s membership before 1800.[[70]](#endnote-70)

In terms of their socio-economic background, the NYSL’s members performed an assortment of occupations. For the purposes of data analysis, attested occupations have been standardised and grouped into nine distinct categories using terminologies which, so far as is possible, would have been familiar to contemporaries.[[71]](#endnote-71) (Fig. 2) Importantly for our interpretation of the professional data, as was typical of the eighteenth century, library members often had multiple occupations which – at times – they performed simultaneously. Consequently, the total number of professions recorded within the analysis exceeds the number of individual library members. [Figure 2 near here]

Furthermore, the professions data captured refers to the entire period that the individual was a member of the NYSL. For instance, John Dies had been an ironmonger and merchant in Hanover Square prior to and upon joining the library in 1754; however, an advertisement printed in the *New-York Gazette* informs us that by 1757 he had ‘declined’ the business of ironmongery and was instead employed by the colonial assembly to repair New York’s fortifications.[[72]](#endnote-72) Similarly, the afore-mentioned James Duane, who had been an attorney upon joining the library as a young man in 1754, was later promoted to several prestigious positions within the colonial administration – including clerk of the Chancery Court of New York (1762 and 1768), acting Attorney General of the Province of New York (1767), and Boundary Commissioner (1768) during the pre-war period of his membership.[[73]](#endnote-73) With these complexities and characteristics of the data in mind, the professions captured reveal broad patterns and trends concerning the socio-economic and professional activities performed by the NYSL’s first members.

Library members were primarily engaged in three occupational areas: ‘Politics and Office Holders’ (31.3%); ‘Commerce, Trade, and Finance’ (26.5%); and ‘Law’ (20.6%). Reflecting the maritime-based economy of the town, a small cluster of members (3.3%) can be categorised under the occupational category of ‘Mariners’; namely ships captains, ship owners and privateers. Reverends Henry Barcley, Samuel Achmuty, and Presbyterian minister Alexander Cumming were the only members drawn from the clergy. Meanwhile, five members – the English-born Army surgeon Dr Richard Ayscough, who established a sailor’s hospital at New York’s Nutten Island (now Governor’s Island); his successor and director of the New York Quarantine Hospital, Dr John Bard; druggist and apothecary Dr William Brownjohn; surgeon Dr Peter Renaduet; and Dr William Farquhar – were engaged in activities relating to ‘Medicine and Health’.

Perhaps reflecting New York’s trade-focused (rather than manufacturing-based) economy, with the exception of fabric merchant Charles Arding (d.1757) – described as a tailor within his probate record – none of the NYSL’s earliest members can be described as ‘Craftsmen, Artisans or Manufacturers’.[[74]](#endnote-74) Conversely, there were a cluster of eight members (accounting for 3.3% of all professional activity) whose wealth was drawn from what is termed ‘Independent Means’. Five of these individuals – William Alexander, the son of James Alexander and the self-styled Earl of Stirling;[[75]](#endnote-75) Gerard G. Beekman; Freeman Clarkson; Peter [Petrus] Stuyvesant; and William Walton Junior, the nephew and favourite of fellow library member, merchant and slave trader William Walton – were described interchangeably as gentlemen or bachelors. Meanwhile, three members were the landlords upholding the manorial system unique to New York’s Hudson Highlands: Robert Livingston, the third Lord of Livingston Manor; Lewis Morris, the third Lord of ‘Morrisania Manor’ in Westchester County; and Beverly Robinson, landlord of the 250,000 acre Highland Patent in Dutchess County.[[76]](#endnote-76)

Closer consideration of each of the three largest occupational groups in turn reveals further details concerning the professional activities of library members. For those who held political offices, almost one quarter (22%) were representatives in the New York Colonial Assembly, which also convened at City Hall. A further 11% were members of the upper chamber, the elite Governor’s Council. With Patricia Bonomi’s work on the development of New York’s colonial political culture in mind, it is important to stress that the above-mentioned ‘politicians’ were drawn from separate – and competing – interest groups, including the De Lancey (mercantile or ‘Court’) and Livingston-Morris (landholding or ‘Country’) factions, thus further emphasising the heterogeneity of the NYSL’s membership.[[77]](#endnote-77)

A further eleven members (14%) served as Aldermen for New York’s wards – North, South, East, West, Dock, and ‘Out Ward’ – while Edward Holland and John Livingston had previously been Aldermen for Albany. Five members (7%) – John Cruger, James Duane, Whitehead Hicks, Edward Holland, and Paul Richard – had been or would later become New York Mayor during their period of membership. Other members held political offices including customs collectors, sheriffs, justices of the peace, bailiffs, coroners, and health officers. Some members enjoyed the most prestigious colonial political offices, including James De Lancey, who was both Lieutenant Governor (1753) and Acting Governor of New York (1757); Abraham De Peyster, Treasurer of the Province of New York (1721); and William Livingston, Governor of New Jersey (1776).

Of those members engaged in Commerce, Trade, and Finance, they were overwhelmingly (78%) merchants or traders of various commodities – including wines, textiles, European goods, and East India goods – or were ship’s chandlers. Peter Van Brugh Livingston, meanwhile, acted as an agent for his father – Philip Livingston, second Lord of Livingston Manor – in Jamaica. At least eight members (11%) are known to have traded goods produced by the labour of enslaved persons, including sugar and other unspecified ‘West India’ goods; while a minimum of seven members (10%) are known to have been involved in the trade of enslaved persons.

Turning finally to consider those employed in Law, almost half (43%) were attorneys, lawyers or solicitors. This group of course includes the NYSL’s co-founders, William Smith Junior, John Morrin Scott, and William Livingston. A further third (36%) were engaged in various colonial judicial positions: John Chambers, James De Lancey, Whitehead Hicks, Robert R. Livingston, and Richard Morris had been or would become Justices of the New York Supreme Court; Henry Holland was Master of the Chancery Court; while Beverly Robinson was Judge of the Court of Common Pleas. A further six members (accounting for 16% of attestations) were employed as clerks in New York’s various courts, including the Chancery Court, Supreme Court, Court of Vice Admiralty, and Court of Oyer and Terminer. The remaining 5% of attestations account for three members who were engaged in land speculation, such as boundary commissioners and patent-holders.

Thus, with respect to their socio-economic status, the NYSL’s initial founders were an elite group, predominantly – although, not exclusively – drawn from the upper echelons of colonial society.[[78]](#endnote-78) Compared to the more humble membership of similar contemporary colonial libraries (such as those of rural Pennsylvania), the NYSL’s members were largely merchants, politicians, or attorneys. New York’s leading colonial and Dutch settler families – including the Livingstons, De Lanceys, De Peysters, Van Cortlandlts, and Philipses – who dominated colonial politics, trade, and shaped the colony’s social structure were all represented. That said, only nine individuals (8%) are known to have received a college education. This is perhaps unsurprising: there were very few universities established within the American colonies prior to the mid-eighteenth century for them to have attended; even King’s College was not established until 1754. Consequently, those members who did attend college in America almost exclusively attended Yale in the neighbouring colony of Connecticut.[[79]](#endnote-79) The sole exception is merchant and slave trader John Troup, who graduated from King’s College (alongside his son, later also a library member) in 1769. Despite a portion of the members being drawn from the colonial elite, only a very select few would have been educated in England; namely, James De Lancey who was educated at the University of Cambridge and studied for the bar at Lincoln’s Inn, and his son James De Lancey Junior, who completed his entire education in England.[[80]](#endnote-80)

At its outset, this article set out the hypothesis that voluntary associations such as the NYSL provided spaces for likeminded individuals to meet, form contacts, and develop nascent business and social networks. As Sheryllynne and John Haggerty demonstrate in their study of the construction and life cycles of business networks in mid eighteenth-century Liverpool, this overlap between commerce and socio-cultural institutions was typical.[[81]](#endnote-81) Like New York, Liverpool was also a rapidly expanding, Atlantic-facing port town. Although acknowledging that modern scholars will never fully learn what was said privately beyond the details recorded in the formal minute books of such organisations, Haggerty and Haggerty highlight the importance of membership of voluntary associations for widening ties and career progression.[[82]](#endnote-82)

Applying their framework to the NYSL membership reveals an interconnecting web of professional and familial ties between individual members. As already mentioned, the library’s co-founders William Smith Junior, John Morrin Scott, and William Livingston were business associates and lawyers, while those who were members of the colonial assembly would have been familiar to each other, even if they were drawn from opposing political factions. Similar instances of pre-existing relationships are visible elsewhere: merchant John Aspinwall of Flushing in Queens County was in partnership with fellow library member Thomas Doughty until 1759; John Ludlow enjoyed a business partnership with his brother and fellow library member William Ludlow, selling European and India goods until 1763; while manorial landlord Beverly Robinson was briefly a mercantile partner of fellow library member Oliver De Lancey. As was common amongst eighteenth-century expatriate mercantile families, these business partnerships were often strengthened via marriages which occurred between both parties.[[83]](#endnote-83) For instance, in 1758 fabric merchant and library member Thomas Duncan’s daughter Frances married George Duncan Ludlow, the son of his business partner and future fellow library member Gabriel Ludlow. Marriages between library members could also prove to be detrimental, such as that of Phila Franks – the daughter of library member Jacob Franks and Bilhah Abigail Levy – who, to her Jewish parents’ intense disapproval, married fellow library member and Huguenot Oliver De Lancey in 1742. Thus, several of the NYSL’s members were related not only through their library membership, but also by business and marital ties.

The mercantile Walton family provide an illuminating example of the complex connections that occurred between members, and the potential opportunities for social advancement that may have arisen as a consequence thereof. (Fig. 3) Library member, merchant, and slave trader William Walton was in partnership with his brother (and non-library member) Jacob. With no children of his own, William’s nephew – William Walton Junior, also a library member – became his heir and favourite. James Thompson, a library member and merchant who sold Irish linens from his store at Crommeline’s Wharf, married Catherine Walton – who was Jacob’s daughter, William Junior’s sister, and William’s niece – in 1753. In 1757, William Junior married Mary De Lancey, the daughter of fellow library member and Lieutenant Governor, James De Lancey. Meanwhile in 1749, Lewis Morris Junior (Lord of Morrisania Manor) married a second Walton sister, Mary. Thus, through marriage, the more humble merchant James Thompson became connected to two of the most powerful families in colonial New York. [Figure 3 near here]

Closer examination of the membership records of New York clubs and associations reveals significant overlaps with the NYSL, indicating that individuals who were members of one institution also enjoyed opportunities to meet elsewhere. As the NYSL predates many of New York’s eighteenth-century societies, the surviving evidence suggests that membership of the library granted access to subsequent societies, or paved the way for their foundation. For instance, merchants Elias Desbrosses and Lawrence Kortright appeared alongside New York City Mayor and fellow library member John Cruger as members of the New York Chamber of Commerce when it was established in the late 1760s. Other clusters of library members appear on the membership lists of the 1764 ‘Society for Promotion of Arts, Agriculture and Oeconomy in New York’,[[84]](#endnote-84) the 1771 ‘Society of the Hospital in the City of New York’,[[85]](#endnote-85) and amongst the several membership records of the ‘Marine Society of New York’.[[86]](#endnote-86) A further group of six members – including attorneys James Duane, Lambert Moore, and Joseph Murray alongside merchants Leonard Lispenard and Paul Richard, and colonial official Archibald Kennedy – all enjoyed positions of authority at King’s College, ranging from Governors and Trustees to treasurers and secretaries. Thus, with Haggerty and Haggerty’s conclusions in mind, the suggestion is that – beyond simply access to books – library membership provided socially ambitious New Yorkers with opportunities to build and strengthen nascent professional and political ties, and to develop extensive and advantageous social networks.

One other curious detail raises further questions regarding why individuals might choose to subscribe to the library. Wills do not survive for all of the NYSL’s members for an assortment of reasons; several are known to have died intestate, other members left New York and were subsequently untraceable, while other wills may have been lodged but have simply been lost.[[87]](#endnote-87) Nevertheless, an examination of the known surviving wills of the library’s members, supplemented by estate sales advertised in newspapers, reveals that at least seven members had private libraries of their own. Furthermore, some of these private libraries were reported to be substantial. This group was almost exclusively comprised of lawyers, with surgeon Dr Peter Renaduet being the sole exception. These individuals also tended to be amongst the eldest library members; the suggestion is that lawyers and attorneys would have purchased their own books – prior to the NYSL’s establishment – which were necessary to perform their profession. Attorney John Chambers (1699-1764), for instance, who held several prominent colonial positions, owned his own collection of law books which he divided between fellow library member (and lawyer) Augustus Van Cortland and future library member and Governor of New York John Jay.[[88]](#endnote-88)

However, the data also indicates that those who migrated to New York from the British Isles may have brought more extensive book collections with them; or, had the contacts in London to keep them updated. William Smith, the father of co-founder William Smith Junior, was born in England and migrated to New York aged approximately eighteen. After studying law at Gray’s Inn in London in 1724, he returned to New York where he became a prestigious lawyer and fierce proponent of educating New York’s law students. His personal library, which his students were able to access, contained over 1600 volumes, of which approximately only one quarter were law books.[[89]](#endnote-89) Joseph Murray, meanwhile, who was born in Ireland and also studied law in London at the Middle Temple, owned one of the best legal libraries in the colony, which was left to King’s College upon his death in 1757. Murray’s wife, Grace Crosby Freeman – daughter of Governor William Cosby – also had her own private library.[[90]](#endnote-90) Given that these individuals already had access to books, it raises questions regarding what encouraged them to pledge their funds to the NYSL, and what would make the cost of their membership worthwhile.

Similar questions can be asked about Moses and Naphtaly [Naphtali] Franks, of the prestigious Jewish mercantile family. The brothers had joined their father Jacob as library members by 1758, as did their uncle, Aaron Franks; however, they had left New York during the 1730s to learn the mercantile trade and by 1754 all three were resident in London. Indeed, in 1754 Moses was sent £300 to purchase books for the NYSL from London.[[91]](#endnote-91) Without further detail from the NYSL’s surviving minute books, the suggestion is that their membership was symbolic, providing them with other social or commercial advantages rather than access to physical texts. In his study of the similarly-organised Wigtown subscription library in Scotland, Towsey has previously shown that a sizeable proportion of the members did not borrow books, leading him to conclude that for such individuals the library’s importance derived from its role as a venue of polite sociability rather than a resource for information.[[92]](#endnote-92) Thus, while perhaps the personal motives of such individuals to join the NYSL may never be fully known, the suggestion is that the cost of library membership granted something beyond simply access to literature; whether that was a sense of civic duty or cultural improvement, or access to the cultural, mercantile, and political networks outlined above.

**Conclusion**

This new perspective on the records of an early American social library enhances existing understandings of both library history and that of the colonial societies which they served. Taking the colony of New York as a case study, this article has simultaneously shed light upon the founding and quotidian operation of the NYSL as a voluntary association within the specific context of a heterogeneous colonial society, as well as identifying and analysing the specific community of readers who gathered to form it. Meanwhile, the absence of specific sections of the wider colonial population – namely, women, black Americans, Native Americans, artisans, manual workers, and the poor – provides an insight into the accessibility and nature of the burgeoning Habermasian ‘public sphere’ in mid eighteenth-century New York.[[93]](#endnote-93)

This article has explored the NYSL’s establishment in the mid-eighteenth century, which drew upon the subscription-based model that had been first introduced at the Library Company of Philadelphia and was subsequently (and successfully) adopted elsewhere across the Atlantic seaboard. However, despite its similarities and features shared in common with contemporary early American social libraries, the NYSL was not simply a replica of such institutions. Instead, the NYSL was shaped directly by the community which it served. First, despite the repeated insistence by contemporaries that reading was directly linked to progress and politeness, it took colonial New Yorkers over twenty years and a unique set of circumstances – namely, the founding of Kings College and the imminent threat of the overbearing reach of the Anglican church into popular education – to spur them into action. The NYSL’s founders adopted elements of the successful subscription model and fine-tuned it to suit local requirements.[[94]](#endnote-94)

Secondly, as we have seen, New York’s unique heterogenous character – which was a direct consequence of its history as a Dutch colony – shaped the nature of the NYSL’s membership, with members drawn from different ethnicities and religious denominations. Detailed prosopographical and biographical research, combined with the complementary quantitative analysis facilitated by digital humanities projects allows us to unpick not only the socio-economic backgrounds of the NYSL’s founding members but also the personal connections between them. Many were from the upper sections of colonial society – wealthy merchants, lawyers, and local and colonial officials – but these men were joined by more humble local traders and mariners. By delving into their otherwise untold personal histories even further, this article reveals the commercial and familial connections that drew these otherwise disparate individuals together, and suggests how burgeoning connections established at the NYSL facilitated access to New York’s subsequent voluntary associations. Thus, through its influence in the establishment of later civic societies, the NYSL in turn shaped New York society.

Finally, by considering who was included within the library membership, we can reflect on those individuals who were excluded from this tightly-knit community of readers: namely, women, black Americans (free or enslaved), and Native Americans, as well as artisans, manual workers, and those who simply lacked access to funds. By situating the history of the NYSL within a broader history of New York, we can begin to consider the extent to which such exclusion was structural; black or female New Yorkers, for instance, were not legally entitled to hold property, while others were excluded on the basis of their personal economic circumstances.

Expanding the lens even further to consider how the NYSL’s membership lists and organisational practices compare to those of similar contemporary social libraries helps us to consider the ways in which New York was exceptional, or typical, of North American standard practices. As such, this article highlights the potential of large-scale digital humanities initiatives – such as the AHRC-funded project *Libraries, Reading Communities and Cultural Formation in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic* from which this article emerges – for informing future large scale comparative analyses of social and subscription libraries, in contrast to the localised studies which tend to dominate library history. Ultimately, this article concludes that biographical approaches to library history can be of crucial importance for enhancing current understandings of early American communities.

(8471 words)

**List of Figures**

Figure 1: Bookplate of the Albany Library Society, 1759. Taken from Charles Dexter Allen, *American Book-Plates: A Guide to their Study with Examples* (New York, NY: Macmillan and Co, 1894), digitised by Project Gutenberg at <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/47682/47682-h/47682-h.htm#page_084>> (accessed 16 October 2020), 84.

Figure 2: Attestations of professional activity by NYSL members.

Figure 3: The Walton-Thompson-De Lancey-Morris family tree.

1. This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (grant number AH/S007083/1). The author is grateful for feedback received on earlier versions of this paper from participants of the History of Libraries Seminar, the Library & Information History Group of CILIP, BSECS, the State Library of New South Wales, and the University of Liverpool’s Eighteenth-Century Worlds Research Centre. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. ‘A Short Account of the Establishment of the Library’, in *The Charter, Laws, and Catalogue of Books of the Union Library Company of Hatborough,* Union Library Company of Hatborough (Philadelphia: Zachariah Poulson Junior, 1788), 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. E. V. Lamberton, Christian Lehman, Joshua Potts, David Reese, Samuel Magaw, Thomas Penn and John Penn, ‘Colonial Libraries of Pennsylvania’, *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 42, no. 3 (1918), 234. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. ‘Short Account of the Establishment of the Library’, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid.,* 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Lorne D. Bruce, ‘Subscription Libraries for the Public in Canadian Colonies, 1775-1850’, *Library & Information History* 34, no. 1 (2018), 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Peter Borsay, ‘The English Urban Renaissance: The Development of Provincial Urban Culture, c.1680-c.1760’, *Social History* 5, no. 2 (1977), 581-603; Social libraries also formed part of Peter Clark’s ‘Associational World’, cited in Mark Towsey and Kyle B. Roberts, ‘Introduction’, in *Before the Public Library: Reading, Community, and Identity in the Atlantic World, 1650-1850,* ed. Mark Towsey and Kyle B. Roberts (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 14-15. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Peter Borsay, ‘The Urban Renaissance Revisited’, in *The English Urban Renaissance Revisited*, ed. John Hinks and Catherine Armstrong (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 6-27. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. *Urban Renaissance Revisited,* ed. Hinks and Armstrong. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. *The Life of Benjamin Franklin, Written by Himself,* ed. John Bigelow, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 208; Jesse H. Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library: The Origins of the Public Library Movement in New England 1629-1855* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 56-57. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The Leadhill Miners’ Library (1741); Kelso Library (c.1750) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Quoted in M. Kay Flavel, ‘The Enlightened Reader and the New Industrial Towns: A Study of the Liverpool Library’, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 8, no. 1 (1985), 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. For the broad geographical scope of colonial social libraries, see The Davies Project at Princeton University, ‘Database of American Libraries before 1876’, <https://daviesproject.princeton.edu/databases/index.html> (accessed 31 Oct 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Towsey and Roberts, ‘Introduction’, 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Austin Baxter Keep, *History of the New York Society Library* (New York: The De Vinne Press, 1908); Jennifer Furlong, ‘Reading French in Early Nineteenth-Century New York: The New York Society Library as Agent of Cultural Exchange’, *Mémoires du livre/Studies in Book Culture* 11, no. 1 (2019), 1-30: Robert Koehler, ‘Challenging Institutional Ambitions: The Practice of Book Exchanges at the New York Society Library, 1789-1795’, in *Before the Public Library,* ed. Towsey and Roberts, 201-217. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *Life of Benjamin Franklin*, 183-85. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. *Ibid.*, 207-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. *Ibid.,* 208. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Lamberton et al, ‘Colonial Libraries’, 194. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ross W. Beales and James N. Green, ‘Practices of Reading: Libraries and their Users’, in *A History of the Book in America. Volume One: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World,* ed. Hugh Amory and David Hall (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, for the American Antiquarian Society, 2007), 402. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. James Raven, ‘From Promotion to Proscription: Arrangements for Reading and Eighteenth-Century Libraries’, in *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England,* ed. James Raven, Helen Small, and Naomi Tadmor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 176; Bruce, ‘Subscription Libraries’, 44; Shera, *Public Library*, 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Beales and Green, ‘Libraries and their Users’, 400-2; Joanna Innes, ‘Libraries in Context: Social, Cultural and Intellectual Background’, in *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland. Volume II: 1640-1850,* ed. Keith A. Manley and Giles Mandelbrote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 292; Robert Darnton, ‘From Printing Shop to Bookshelves: How Books Began the Journey to Enlightenment Libraries’, in *The Meaning of the Library: A Cultural History*, ed. Alice Crawford (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 101). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. *Life of Benjamin Franklin*, 208. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Towsey and Roberts, ‘Introduction’, 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Richard Sher, *The Enlightenment and The Book: Scottish Authors and their Publishers in Eighteenth-Century Britain, Ireland, and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 506. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 279-81, 314; James Raven, *London Booksellers and American Customers: The Transatlantic Literary Community and the Charleston Library Society* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Mark Towsey, ‘“The Talent Hid in a Napkin”: Castle Libraries in Eighteenth-Century Scotland’, in *The History of Reading, Volume 2: Evidence from the British Isles, c.1750-1950*, ed. Katie Halsey and W. R. Owens (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 15-31; Frank Beckwith, ‘The Eighteenth-Century Proprietary Library in England’, *Journal of Documentation*, 3, no. 2 (1947), 84; Beales and Green, ‘Libraries and their Users’, 339. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Charles T. Laugher, *Thomas Bray’s Grand Design: Libraries of the Church of England in America, 1695-1785* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1973), 42-44; Tom Glynn, *Reading Publics: New York City’s Public Libraries, 1754-1911* (New York: Empire State Editions, an imprint of Fordham University Press, 2015), 18-19; Keep, *New York Society Library*, 9-28. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Keep, *New York Society Library*, 64-69. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Laugher, *Bray’s Grand Design*, 20; Anita Schorsch, ‘A Library in America, 1758-1858’ (PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, 1986), 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Christine Pawley, ‘Retrieving Readers: Library Experiences’, *The Library Quarterly* 76, no. 4 (2006), 383; Towsey and Roberts, ‘Introduction’, 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Beales and Green, ‘Libraries and their Users’, 400. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. *Royal Gazette,* 15 January 1780. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Markman Ellis, ‘Poetry and Civic Urbanism in the Coffee-House Library in the Mid-Eighteenth Century’, in *Before the Public Library,* ed. Towsey and Roberts, 72. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. *Whereas a publick library would be very useful as well as ornamental to this city…* (New York: Printer Unknown, 1754). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Glynn, *Reading Publics*, 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. *Whereas a publick library* … [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. William Smith, *The History of the Province of New-York* (London: Thomas Wilcox, 1757), 213; *Charter and Bye-Laws of the New-York Society Library; with a Catalogue of the Books Belonging to the Said Library* (New York: Hugh Gaine, 1773), 3-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. These members were James Alexander (d.1756); Charles Arding (d.1757); Henry Hansen (d.1755); Edward Holland (d.1756); Joseph Murray (d.1757); Captain Paul Richard (d.1756); and Stephen Van Cortland (d.1756). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. *A Catalogue of the Library, Belonging to the Corporation of the City of New-York* (New York: John Holt, 1766), 2; Smith, *New-York,* 194. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. *Whereas a publick library …*; Keep, *New York Society Library*, 151. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Keep, *New York Society Library*, 79; *Catalogue of the Library*, 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Raven, *London Booksellers*, 60-64. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. David Allan, *A Nation of Readers: The Lending Library in Georgian England* (London: The British Library, 2008), 54; see Max Skjönsberg, ‘“This Revolution in the Town”: Richard Champion and the Early Years of the Bristol Library Society’, in this special issue of *Library & Information History*. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. *A Catalogue of the Library*, 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Keep, *New York Society Library*, 81 and 189. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. *Charter and Bye-Laws*, 3-11. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. *Whereas a publick library would be very useful as well as ornamental to this city [Albany]...* (New York: Printer Unknown, 1758). [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Allan, *Nation of Readers*, p. 72; Bob Harris and Charles McKean, *The Scottish Town in the Age of the Enlightenment 1740-1820* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Rule IX, *Whereas a publick library [Albany]*.... [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. *The Charter, Laws, and Catalogue of Books, of the Library Company of Burlington* (Philadelphia: William Dunlap, 1758), 4; *A Catalogue of Books, Belonging to the Union-Library-Company of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: James Chattin, 1754), 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Charles Dexter Allen, *American Book-Plates: A Guide to their Study with Examples* (New York, NY: Macmillan and Co, 1894), digitised by Project Gutenberg at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/47682/47682-h/47682-h.htm#page_084> (accessed 16 October 2020), 84. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. *A Catalogue of the Books Belonging to the Albany Library: With the Law of the Legislature of New-York, to Incorporate the Trustees; The Bye-Laws of the Corporation;&c* (Albany, NY: Barber and Southwick, 1793), 11-12; ‘Albany Library Society Bookplate’, Winterthur Digital Collections, <http://contentdm.winterthur.org/digital/collection/Bookplates/id/399> (accessed 25 October 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. *A List of the Subscribers to the New-York Library* (New York: Printer Unknown, 1754). [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. See Simon Burrows, ‘The Common Cosmopolitan Reading Culture of Eighteenth-Century Europe and North America: New Digital Perspectives’, in this special issue of *Library & Information History*. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Haynes McMullen *American Libraries Before 1876* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 63; Library members were exclusively male in all known comparable contemporary American social libraries, including the Library Company of Burlington, NJ (1758), the Juliana Library Company, PA (1765), the Library Company of Bridge-Town (Mount Holly), NJ (1768), the Association Library Company of Philadelphia, PA (1765), and the Union Library Company of Philadelphia, PA (1754; 1765). [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. *The Charter, Laws, Catalogue of Books, List of Philosophical Instruments, &c of the Juliana Library-Company, in Lancaster …* (Philadelphia: D. Hall and W. Sellers, 1766), 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. *A Catalogue of Books, Belonging to the Library Company of Bridge-Town, (Commonly called Mount-Holly) in New-Jersey* (Philadelphia: William Goddard, 1768), xv. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Helen Doe, ‘Gender and Business: Women in business or businesswomen? An assessment of the history of

entrepreneurial women’, in *The Routledge Companion to Business History*, ed. John Wilson et al (Abington: Routledge, 2017) 347; Serena Zabin, *Dangerous Economies: Status and Commerce in British New York* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. *Anglicizing America: Empire, Revolution, Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), ed. Ignacio Gallup-Diaz, Andrew Shankman and David J. Silverman; Deborah A. Rosen, ‘Women and Property across Colonial America: A Comparison of Legal Systems in New Mexico and New York’, *William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (2003), 355-381; David Evan Narrett, ‘Men's Wills and Women's Property Rights in Colonial New York’, in *Women in the Age of the American Revolution,* ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia & United States Capitol Historical Society, 1989), 91-133. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Furlong, ‘Reading French’, 4-5; Koehler, ‘Challenging Institutional Ambitions’, 203, 205-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Sophie H. Jones, ‘Member in Focus: Celebrating the First Female Member of the New York Society Library’ (2021), available at <https://heuristplus.sydney.edu.au/h6-alpha/viewers/smarty/showReps.php?db=Libraries_Readers_Culture_18C_Atlantic&q=id:49028&template=Blog%20entry.tpl> (accessed 25 March 2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. For more on the history of the New Netherlands, see Russell Shorto, *The Island at the Centre of the World: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan & the Forgotten Colony that Shaped America* (London: Abacus, 2014)*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Joyce D. Goodfriend, *Before the Melting Pot: Society and Culture in Colonial New York City, 1664-1730* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 61-63; Michael Kammen, *Colonial New York: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Lodwick, quoted in Goodfriend, *Melting Pot*, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Goodfriend, *Melting Pot*, 68-74; Kammen, *Colonial New York*, 128-32. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Although more simplistic than the approach employed within this study, application of the methodology used by Alice Kenney to identify Dutch names amongst of revolutionary militia records – namely, the appearance of the prefix ‘Ten’ or ‘Van’ – to the membership records of the New York Society Library yields similar results. See Alice A. Kenney, ‘The Albany Dutch: Loyalists and Patriots’, *New York History* 42, no. 4 (1961), 341. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Ned Landsman, ‘The Episcopate, the British Union, and the Failure of Religious Settlement in Colonial British America’, in *The First Prejudice: Religious Tolerance and Intolerance in Early America,* ed. Chris Beneke and Christopher S. Grenada (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 75-99. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. *The Laws & Acts of the General Assembly for Their Majesties province of New-York…* (New York, NY: William Bradford, 1694), 15-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Thomas W. Spalding, ‘Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton (28 August 1774–04 January 1821)’, *American National Biography Online* (hereafter ANB). [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. These high level occupational areas have been developed in close consultation with the Project’s Co-Investigators and with partner projects using similar occupational categories, including Professor Simon Burrow’s ‘FBTEE: The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe’ database (<http://fbtee.uws.edu.au/main/>) and Dr Katie Halsey’s ‘Books and Borrowing 1750-1830: An Analysis of Scottish Borrowers' Registers’ (<https://borrowing.stir.ac.uk/introducing-books-and-borrowing-1750-1830/>); Penelope J. Corfield, ‘Classifying Historical Occupations into Economic Sectors: Problems and Potential’ (2013), Accompaniment to London Historical Database (LED), available at <https://www.penelopejcorfield.com/british-history/electoral-history/> (accessed 25 March 2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. *New-York Gazette, or Weekly Post-Boy*, 1 August 1757, 1; *At a session of the General Assembly of the colony of New York…* (New York: James Parker, 1759), 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Cathy Matson, ‘James Duane (06 February 1733–01 February 1797)’, *ANB.* [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Cathy Matson, *Merchants and Empire: Trading in Colonial New York* (Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 248-49 and 278; Probate Record of Charles Arding, 31 March 1758, *New York, U.S., Wills and Probate Records, 1659-1999,* reproduced at www.ancestrylibrary.com (accessed 25 March 2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. For more on Alexander’s claim to the lapsed earldom of Stirling, see Paul David Nelson, ‘William Alexander, styled sixth earl of Stirling (1726–1783),’ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online,* [https://doi-org.liverpool.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/336](https://doi-org.liverpool.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/ref%3Aodnb/336) (accessed 31 Oct 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. Sung Bok Kim, *Landlord and Tenant in Colonial New York: Manorial Society, 1664-1775* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978); Jack P. Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 124-41. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. Patricia U. Bonomi, *A Factious People: Politics and Society in Colonial New York* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1971),60-71. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. As Bonomi highlights, while the members considered above can largely be described as ‘elites’, there remained a substantial degree of political heterogeneity between them, with lawyers, merchants and politicians forming opposing interest groups. Bonomi, *Factious People,* 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. These were: Reverend Henry Barcley, Philip Livingston, William Livingston, Lewis Morris, William Smith Junior, and William Smith Senior. Barcley later received a Doctorate of Divinity from Oxford in 1760. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. James De Lancey Junior attended Eton College, Cambridge, and studied for the bar at Lincoln's Inn. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. Sheryllynne Haggerty and John Haggerty, ‘The Life Cycle of a Metropolitan Business Network: Liverpool 1750-1810’, *Explorations in Economic History* 48 (2011), 189-206. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. *Ibid.,* 191 and 196. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. David Hancock, ‘The Trouble with Networks; Managing the Scots’ Early Modern Madeira Trade’, *The Business History Review* 79, no. 3 (2005), 474-75; Zabin, *Dangerous Economies*, 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
84. Nicholas Gouverneur, James Jauncey and David Van Horne. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. Hugh Gaine, Whitehead Hicks, Lawrence Kortright, Leonard Lispenard, William Ludlow, William Walton, John Watts, and William Smith. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
86. Whitehead Hicks (1788, 1792); Leonard Lispenard (1772); Lambert Moore (1788, 1792); John Waddell (1770); William Walton (1770, 1781). [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
87. *New York, U.S., Wills and Probate Records, 1659-1999*, reproduced at www.ancestrylibrary.com (accessed 11 March 2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
88. Will of John Chambers, 1 May 1764, *New York, U.S., Wills and Probate Records, 1659-1999.* [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
89. Jessica Kross, ‘William Smith (8 October 1697 – 22 November 1769)’, *ANB.* [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
90. Ronald Howard, ‘Joseph Murray, 1694 – 28 April 1757), *ANB.*; a 1757 advertisement calls for return of ‘any Books belonging to the Library of the late Joseph Murray, or to that of the Testator’s late Lady’. *New-York Gazette*, 16 May 1757. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
91. Keep, *New York Society Library*, 154. [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
92. Mark Towsey, ‘First Steps in Associational Reading: Book Use and Sociability at the Wigtown Subscription Library, 1795-9’, *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 100, no. 3 (2009), 455-95. [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
93. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press 1991); James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1-16. [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
94. Towsey and Roberts, ‘Introduction’, 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-94)