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A Room of Her Own: The Woman's Library –A Footnote to New York City Library History

Now, the first demand which is made in behalf of these working women is that all those who manifest a desire for information shall have a chance to obtain it. Provide the material for them—good books, good papers, and good rooms of resort, and let them know that they will be welcome there. The next thing we demand is, that they shall have time to read; and this is a demand which comes right home to the employer.¹

Henry Ward Beecher, Oct. 26, 1858

The speeches given by Rev. Henry Ward Beecher and James T. Brady at the Fourth Universalist Society on Broadway in 1858, began the movement in New York City to open a Woman's Library for the working woman. It would take two years until these two forward thinkers' revolutionary idea would become a reality, but during this time the proposal was hotly debated and prominent New York citizenry took sides. To understand why this idea was so controversial, it is necessary to consider working women in the broader context of 19th century America, as well as the place of libraries, reading and self-education in an urban environment.

The sphere of women in the nineteenth century was highly restricted, with the "cult of domesticity," the accepted order of behavior for the female sex. However, most middle class American women accepted their fate and were educated to become good mothers and wives, as evidenced in part by the publication of numerous advice books for young women which directed proper behavior and by the curriculums followed in the academies and seminaries for young ladies.

The success of democratic institutions, as is conceded by all, depends upon the intellectual and moral character of the mass of the people. If they are intelligent and virtuous, democracy is a blessing; but if they are ignorant and wicked, it is only a curse,...It is equally conceded, that the formation of the moral and intellectual character of the young is committed mainly to the female hand. The mother forms the character of

the future man;...Let the women of a country be made virtuous and intelligent, and the men will certainly be the same.²

With new Americans entering the country in large numbers by the second half of the nineteenth century, these latest arrivals were not part of the privileged middle class and women, as well as men, were forced into the labor market to earn a living. In New York City, women workers were limited to a few “female” employment opportunities, but with the rise of industrialization and the development of the city as a center for publishing, communications, manufacturing, and textiles more opportunities were available to young, unmarried women. By 1860, several dozen industries employed more than 90% of the city’s working women.³ The author’s 1858 letter-to-the editor of the *New York Times*, reviewed the different jobs in which New York City women were engaged and her appeal for a Woman’s Library. She divides them into three classes: those that that have had the advantage of a good education and head the workrooms in factories and sales-rooms; those that work for mediocre wages and do such tasks such as china painting, wig-making, brush making etc.; and the last class of women are those who do not work all year and have “starving wages when they do get it.”⁴

Although some women could maintain an acceptable lifestyle, others were forced to live in squalor with very little hope of improvement. The elite women, who took up the cause of the “working woman” in mid-nineteenth century New York City, were unsuccessful in improving wages or working conditions. The belief of men, and most women of the era, was that women working outside of the home did not conform to the ideal of true womanhood. Life for all of these working women was difficult, and the notion that a good life was achievable for those who worked hard was more of a dream than a reality for the thousands of women who toiled in the city each day. The mill-girl, who made an early foray into the work force in the 1840s in rural New England, was protected by the paternalism of the factory owner who supervised the moral and spiritual well-being of his charges. However, in New York City this sense of responsibility disappeared by mid-century when the lure of large profits and a competitive market took precedent over the individual, and the work of women just became a means to the end.⁵ Where the mill-girl had opportunities to enrich her mind as well as her spirit, the factory girl had few avenues open to her for intellectual enlightenment.

A movement to protect women in the workplace in New York City did not gain momentum until the 1860s when The Working-Women's Protective Union was formed. The *New York Times* on March 22, 1864 reported on a meeting which took place at the Cooper Institute on March 21st. Charles P. Day presided over the meeting which focused on the plight of 30,000 working women employed in all branches of business in New York City, and submitted a constitution from the members of the committee for the formation of a union.⁶ The Working-Women's Protective Union dates to 1863 in the midst of the Civil War and not long after the Draft Riots in July 1863. Inflation devastated the working class who had difficulty purchasing the bare necessities, and male workers began organizing strikes with women soon joining them. The women in the sewing trades were poorly paid and made about \$2.50 a week, while men earned about \$2 a day in other skilled jobs. Women began organizing and holding meetings and on November 18, 1863 the Working-Women's Union was formed to demand higher wages and shorter hours. It did not take long for the men to take over and the name changed to the Working Women's Protective Union of the City of New York whose mission it was to protect working women by providing legal protection from unscrupulous employers.⁷

With the factory girl of New York City struggling to survive, there were very limited resources available for her to challenge her mind. By contrast, men during this same period had opportunities for enrichment after work. An editorial by J.H.W. Tookey, hatter, in the *New York Daily Times* on May 13, 1854, told readers of the importance of providing outlets for intellectual improvement for the city's laborers. "Having been a 'worker' from my youth, I have heard much of the wrongs of labor, and seen not a little of the degradation of the mechanic, but also have seen 'self-culture' to be the 'one thing needful;' and all reforms valuable in proportion to the aid they give to the individual."⁸ In 1820 the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen established the Apprentices' Library. "This Library, therefore, is the great platform, on which a high moral and intellectual character may be formed. When the labor of the day is over, instead of the apprentice scouring the streets, visiting barrooms or theaters, mingling with idle, vicious companions, he takes his seat in the library...."⁹ The Apprentices' Library wasn't the only refuge for intellectual enlightenment available to working men in New York City. The Mechanics' Institute was founded in 1830 and incorporated in 1833, "for the purpose of promoting the general diffusion of useful knowledge among the mechanical classes. For this purpose a library and museum were founded, and classes established in the various branches of natural

philosophy, the physical sciences, and most of the modern languages.”¹⁰ These early New York City libraries reinforced the belief of the value of books and reading to a democratic, informed society where men had a chance to participate in self-improvement activities.

Clues about the reading practices of middle-class women in Antebellum America can be gleaned from written accounts they left behind in diaries or from articles published on the subject in contemporary ladies’ periodicals or advice books popular in the nineteenth century. The general consensus was that novel reading was to be discouraged. “The importance and necessity of reading need hardly be affirmed. Its use is fully understood and admitted. But there is great danger of enervating the mind by improper reading. For a young girl to indulge much in novel-reading is a very serious evil.”¹¹ However, accounts written by working women about their reading habits do not seem to exist, but in all probability even if there were first person narratives, they would reveal that at the end of a long work day there was little time left to read.¹² The other part of the puzzle is the question of how widespread literacy was during this period? Following the Revolutionary War, literacy spread among middle-class women in America. Female Academies and Seminaries proliferated in both the North and the South and girls were taught what was considered appropriate for their future roles as wives and mothers. The first federal census to measure literacy was in 1850 and reported that the number of northeastern women who could both read and write was almost equal to that of northeastern men.¹³

Public school education in New York City was a controversial issue in the early 19th century. As early as 1825 the Free School Society of New York City wanted the creation of a single public school system that would be opened to all children, without regard to social status, race or religious affiliation.¹⁴ The Common Council agreed and even though there was bitter opposition, in 1826 the Free School Society was renamed the Public School Society, but remained a privately run institution. In 1842 the Maclay Bill passed and authorized that each of the city wards would elect commissioners who would control the local schools and acting together would comprise a Board of Education for the City of New York. Finally the city had a system financed from public funds and controlled by the citizenry. The Board of Education in 1853 began building new schools and started an evening school program that by 1856 enrolled 15,000 students, 4,000 of them were women.¹⁵ “In a large city like ours, where there are so many inducements for the youth of both sexes to resort to means of amusement of a frivolous,

immoral, and debasing character, and where, to prevent this, some means of employing leisure hours, and giving opportunity of intercourse and association, must be provided, these schools seem calculated to be especially beneficial.”¹⁶ The curriculum was elementary and was designed to Americanize the new immigrant population. For more advanced education the Free Academy was founded in 1847 with the purpose of educating both rich and poor young men, but it was not until 1869 that the Board of Education established a normal and high school for women and the first class was admitted in 1870.¹⁷

Cultural enlightenment and self-improvement for working women in nineteenth-century New York City, proved challenging. “It is quite true that women have access to most of the City libraries already. But at some of them, the charges are too high, to place them within the reach of those who needed them most. In all of them by some gross and unaccountable injustice, the charges to women are higher than to men, though wages for the latter are three times as high as for the former.”¹⁸ What was needed was a free library specifically for working women that offered lectures, classes, and circulating books to meet their needs. There were however, scattered cases of business owners supplying its female employees with free library facilities.

Messrs. Douglas & Sherwood, the famous skirt manufacturers in White street, have a free library of some thousands of volumes for the use of about nine hundred young women who are employed in that extensive establishment. Thus far the proprietors are highly gratified with the effect of the library. They observe a growing interest in books, and a constant advance in the style of books that are called for. When the library was first opened, it seemed as if nothing would go except tales and novels, with a little poetry. But after a while, the craving for fiction seemed to abate, and now there is a demand regularly increasing for books of a substantial character, such as history and the like.¹⁹

In Brooklyn, a hat factory that employed between six and seven hundred men, women and children, provided 400 volumes on varied subjects which were free to all. “The Library is open on Mondays for the males, and on Wednesdays for females...Cooperating with Mr. PRENTICE in this work, are Messrs. H.O. PIERCE and C.M. GIBBS, gentlemen who wish that the *influences* which surround the “worker” during the hours of labor, may be such as will aid in social intercourse and intellectual association.”²⁰

The development of public libraries in the United States was in its infancy in the 1850s, with the Boston Public Library marking the beginning of the public library movement. Legislation was passed in Boston in 1847 allowing for a tax to establish a free library. By 1851 other cities and towns passed similar legislation.²¹ Controversy arose simultaneous to the movement that questioned the presence of women in libraries. Women were seen by men as a possible distraction to serious study, and it was also considered morally unsuitable by society for men and women to come together during this period. In an attempt to protect female sensibilities, establishing libraries where men and women could sit together seemed out of the question.²² As early as 1856 when the first American manual of library arrangement and administration was published, librarians recommended that a reading room should be established just for females.²³ In New York City, the Astor Library opened to the public in 1854 evolving into the great New York Public Library system.²⁴ The new library catered to the scholar, and no books ever circulated. In the first *Annual Report* in 1855 it was noted that the “gentler sex” complained that there was no reading room provided just for the “ladies.”

This must have been an oversight in planning the library edifice, and, unfortunately, it is now too late to remedy the defect—every inch of it is needed for books. The best that can now be done to meet their wishes is to offer them a place in some of the quiet recesses within the railing, and that has uniformly been done when desired. I am, however, very happy to be able to state that this deficiency has not entirely deprived the library of the refining humanizing influence of female readers; it has often been favored with their presence and if they report that they are here free from molestation of every kind, as I am confident they can, it is to be hoped that a greater number may be induced to try the experiment.²⁵

Although women had access to the library, the available hours were limited by closure at dusk, thus eliminating the possibility of the working women taking advantage of this resource.

The possibility for self-education for women during the first half of the nineteenth-century was very limited. For working women, libraries and the privilege to borrow books for pleasure and enrichment were not readily available in 19th century New York City. The history of libraries in New York City is the story of books and other reading materials being available to a limited clientele, often for a fee with restrictions according to class and gender. The policies of the

libraries in the city were outlined in *Trow's New York City Directory* for 1865. The Apprentices' Library was open from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. "Apprentices and females employed by mechanics, and tradesmen, in their business, receive books gratis; journeymen and others upon the payment of one dollar per annum."²⁶ The history of admittance of employed women to the Apprentices' Library dates to 1857 when the President of the library, Thomas Earle, proposed that females working in manufacturing be granted free access. It wasn't until 1862 that this change was finally adopted. The Annual Reports of the library show that young women were the fastest growing group of readers. There were 200 in 1862, 606 in 1863 and 1,703 in 1864.²⁷ Other libraries such as the City Library were free to all but were only open until 4p.m., and the New York Society Library had a separate reading room for ladies but its use cost \$10 per year.²⁸ The New York Mercantile Library, by the Civil War, allowed anyone who could pay the annual membership dues of \$2 to \$5, including many single women, to take advantage of their services.²⁹ In a letter to the Editor of the *New-York Daily Tribune* the author made an appeal on behalf of working women saying: "And I sincerely hope the time is not far distant when facilities will be opened to the poor workingwoman for self-education; then she will strike out a different path for herself than sewing velvet carpets at two cents a yard, and folding sheets for a penny a thousand."³⁰

Another venue for self-education was the public lecture. "The popular lecture is the most purely democratic of all our democratic institutions."³¹ Public lectures began in the 1830s, usually sponsored by a lyceum where, for a fee, anyone could attend. Also, lectures offered by library societies, and mechanics institutes were a popular pastime and open to everyone. The citizenry realized the value of education for self-improvement and the popularity of the public lecture grew. Audiences became more diverse with men and women from all walks of life attending.³²

The idea for a "Woman's Library" can be traced to 1830 when Cornelius C. Blatchly appealed for a Women's Library in a letter-to-the-editor of the *Workingman's Advocate* on January 2, 1830. Mr. Blatchly supported the workers' political movement in New York City and was one of the labor party's candidates for the Assembly; consequently his proposal was consistent with his views on social issues.³³ "We have an apprentices' library, a mercantile library, and other libraries in this city; but some women justly complain that they have no library to improve thir [sic] sex."³⁴ Although this was an ambitious request, it does not seem that working women were

a consideration. Since industrialization and the influx of immigrants to the city was still in the future, it is not surprising that working women were not addressed in his letter-to-the-editor. It was to take almost three decades for a woman's library for working women to make the news again.

On October 26, 1858, Reverend Henry Ward Beecher and James T. Brady addressed an audience at Reverend E. H. Chapin's Church on "Mental Culture for Woman." The meeting was held to rally support for a Woman's Library, and there was an overwhelming showing of prominent New York City citizens. Rev. Beecher, in his address noted: "We can not say that there is an apathetic condition of the public mind in respect to women, and especially in respect to the wants of working women, when a meeting in their behalf is so thronged that this capacious edifice is not able to contain the half of those who would fain come."³⁵ Mr. Brady went on to say: "It is the object of this meeting, to-night, through the bounty of liberal men, and the generous endeavors of kind women, to establish an institution which shall be not only a library, where instruction may be derived from excellent books, but have connected with it also a reading-room, to which women may resort without experience similar to that of our reverend friend,..."³⁶

After this meeting, a debate over the need for a library gained momentum in the press. In November of 1858 the editor of the *Christian Intelligencer* wanted the influential supporters of the library for women to instead advocate for more employment opportunities for the masses. A response appeared in the *New York Times*. "The fact is, this gentleman did not take the trouble to read the reports of the meeting held at Mr. Chapin's Church, or he would have learned that the chief purpose in founding the Women's Library is to open new avenues of employment to woman, by educating her for them."³⁷ Elbert S. Porter, the Editor of the *Christian Intelligencer*, responded to the letter the following day.

"The truth is that while it will prove a good thing in its way, an ornamental and somewhat useful appendage of the eleemosynary institutions which grace our City and honor the liberality of their supporters, yet it is difficult to see how it will materially help the "poor sewing girl" who must work all day and late in the night to get twelve cents for the making of a dozen capes [sic] of fifteen cents for the making of a pair of pantaloons."³⁸

On November 25, 1858 a letter-to-the-editor appeared in the *New York Times*, refuting the arguments of Reverend Porter published in the *Christian Intelligencier* on November 18, 1858.³⁹ Nothing appeared in the press again until December 31, 1858, when another letter-to-the-editor was published, supporting a library for women. “It is certainly one of the most important and beneficent projects of the day,—one which ought to enlist the support of every one who understands and appreciates the condition of the tens and scores of thousands of young women among us who are compelled to labor for a livelihood, and who need above everything else the means of self-education and the acquisition of useful knowledge...I cannot help thinking that the community only needs to be well-informed on this subject to induce prompt and effectual action,...”⁴⁰ On February 3, 1859 the periodical, *The Independent*, supported the cause and was glad to report that progress had been made. “There is an immense class of women in our city to whom a well-planned library would be a vast benefit. The present plan, if we understand it, proposes to have connected with the library a reading-room, and a registry of women’s wants, by which to facilitate the movements of women seeking employment for support.”⁴¹

Six months later, after two years of controversy and preparation, a Woman’s Library was about to become a reality in New York City. *The New York Times* reported on August 25, 1860 that although the process of establishing this institution took two years, it now had a charter procured from the Legislature, a Board of Trustees, books, and a furnished space on the second floor of the University building (New York University) facing Washington Square. “Nearly 4,000 volumes are already upon the shelves, comprising the best works of the standard authors of the language, and selected with special reference to the tastes and necessities of those whom the library is designed...The books have been purchased with great care and at very low prices,—the whole collection having cost but little over \$1,000.”⁴² The article went on to address the complaints of the opposition, stressing the need of women to productively use their leisure time.

It must be remembered that women are shut out from many sources of amusement and recreation which are open to men. They have no clubs, no lodges, no games, no freedom of frequenting theaters, concerts or public meetings—no means of enjoying their evenings or other leisure hours, but such as the resources of the small circle in which they live may bring within their reach. Books are for them far more of a necessity than for men—and it is certainly surprising that while half-a-dozen large, well-supported public

libraries should exist for the latter, not one should have been provided or projected for the former until now.⁴³

The New-York Daily Tribune, on August 22, 1860, listed the patrons of the library and their donations. Mr. Benjamin H. Field contributed \$2,000, Mr. Joseph Howland \$500, and Mr. Wilson G. Hunt \$200. Some companies that employed women also made contributions, and it was hoped that more donations would be forthcoming.⁴⁴

New York City was a growing metropolis, with many cultural and social outlets when the Woman's Library opened its doors. *Miller's New York As It Is...* (1860) provides a contemporary description of each section of the city, and comments on individual factors which made the city unique.

New York has been ever and justly renowned for its catholic and liberal public benefactions and charities. Among her many glories, this is most conspicuous. New York may be called the asylum for the oppressed and distressed of all nations. Abounding in beneficent institutions suited to the relief of the various "ills that flesh is heir to," and enriched with the most liberal endowments for classical and popular instruction, she bears the palm in all that pertains to the moral, intellectual, and physical advancement of society. It is true we are a mercantile and money-making people, but the empire city is an illustration of some of its noblest uses.⁴⁵

Further into the volume the author provides an account of New York University, where the Woman's Library is housed. "**THE NEW YORK UNIVERSITY** is located on the east side of Washington Square, and forms a noble architectural ornament, being of the English collegiate style of architecture, The University was established in 1831, and has ever maintained its high reputation."⁴⁶ Washington Square was formerly a Potter's Field. "It forms a pleasant up-town park, situated a little to the west of Broadway, between Fourth and Eighth streets. It is surrounded by rows of fine buildings—private residences on each side,..."⁴⁷ This was a very pleasant part of the city and it would prove a welcomed retreat from city life for the women who frequented the new library.

It is interesting to note that the location chosen for the library for women was close to the newly relocated Mercantile Library, which moved to Astor Place in 1855, and also to The Cooper

Union which opened its doors in 1859, only a short distance away. The Mercantile Library's mission was to serve as a school of adult education for working men by providing not only books, but offering lectures and classes.⁴⁸ Peter Cooper, the founder and benefactor of The Cooper Union, decided early in life that the working classes needed more opportunities available to them than the existing institutions provided. By instructing the working classes in practical subjects his primary objective would be accomplished. "This general scheme necessarily included both sexes within the scope, and hence it was decided to extend all the privileges of the institution to males and females alike."⁴⁹ It had a reading room open to both men and women; however its collection was primarily newspapers and magazines, since the school really did not want to compete with neighboring libraries.⁵⁰ Cooper wanted his school to be part of the political and cultural life of the city and the country, and by building a Great Hall with room to seat 900, this venue soon became a popular location for lectures. *Miller's* 1860 guidebook mentions that The Cooper Union was located close to various other literary and scientific societies.⁵¹

Who were the movers and shakers who worked tirelessly for two years in support of the woman's library? Miss Elizabeth M. Powell spearheaded the movement and argued in its favor in the press, with several letters-to-the-editor to her credit. She also selected many of the volumes which were to form the core collection, and appealed to book publishers to purchase the books for low prices.⁵² However, like other nineteenth century women who remain anonymous in our historical record, little else can be gleaned about her, except to assume that her social status gave her the time and inclination to rally for women. The Honorable H.J. Raymond was the President of the Board of Trustees and a prominent New Yorker. He was a well-known New York politician and the founder of the *New York Times* in 1851.⁵³ Benjamin H. Field, a merchant and board member became widely known for his philanthropic endeavors throughout his life. Among his many charitable activities he was the President of the New York Free Circulating Library, trustee of the Working Women's Protective Union and Vice-President of the Society Library.⁵⁴ Other Board members included, Joseph Howland, engraver,⁵⁵ Wilson G. Hunt, importer of wools,⁵⁶ Frederick de Peyster, lawyer, Henry Hilton, judge and Andrew V. Stout, a merchant who established a wholesale boot and shoe store. His business prospered and the shoe and leather merchants organized a bank, for which he would eventually serve as President.⁵⁷ Other prominent New Yorkers who were supporters of the library included the Reverend Daniel

F. Tiemann, James T. Brady, Horace Greeley, Henry Ward Beecher, Reverend Cuyler and Peter Cooper.

The anticipated day had come and on September 26, 1860 the rooms of the Woman's Library were opened to the public but no books were allowed to circulate until the official opening on October 1st.⁵⁸ The formal inauguration was at Dr. Chapin's church on Broadway, the same location where two years earlier the seeds of the project had been sown. Mr. Raymond made the opening remarks and said:

We had libraries for the student, such as the Astor Library; libraries for the merchant's clerk, such as the Mercantile Library; libraries for printers, for apprentices, and for every class, and now, at last, we had a library for women... If the community of New-York responded to the endeavors of the Trustees, there would soon exist in this City an institution which would not only furnish books, but give all forms of instruction in every department of knowledge;...⁵⁹

Following Mr. Raymond's address was Reverend Henry Ward Beecher. He spoke of the need of providing women with reading, even if the materials were novels which he thought better than no reading. Mr. Brady was the next speaker and he spoke about the advances of women over the last two years and the injustices that women had endured. The meeting was adjourned and the Library was officially opened.⁶⁰ On October 4, 1860 the *New York Evangelist* noted the monumental event. "The Library is now open, and is accessible to every woman in the City who wished to avail herself of its advantages. The only expenditure required is an annual contribution of \$1. To those who cannot afford that, it is entirely free."⁶¹ (The subscription fee was actually \$1.50 according to the *Catalogue*.)⁶²

The *Catalogue of Books in the Woman's Library of New York* outlined the rules and regulations of the new library including the hours, and the requirements for membership. "All female residents of New York, above the age of thirteen years, who shall subscribe to the Rules, and be proper persons to enjoy its privileges, shall have access to the Library, during the regular hours, and shall be entitled to borrow books for home reading."⁶³ The *Catalogue* went on to list the duties of the librarian, which were many, and a listing of all the books in the library divided into

categories such as Novels and Tales, Theological, Mental and Moral Science, General Literature, French Works, British Poets, Fashion Plates, Historical Works and even Medical Science.⁶⁴

The library quickly became an attraction for foreign visitors. On Friday, October 12th The Prince of Wales, while visiting New York City, was taken to see the Woman's Library. "The room was crowded with ladies, in full toilet...The Prince entered the room leaning upon the arm of the Chancellor, and was received by Miss Powell,..."⁶⁵ Later in the month, Lady Jane Franklin visited the library after receiving an invitation from Miss Elizabeth M. Powell, and she eagerly accepted because of her interest in improving the conditions of women from all economic groups.

She made particular inquiries as to the future plans of [of sic] the Library, and repeatedly expressed her gratification that such an Institution was opened to women in this City. She said that whatever intellect or talent a woman had, be she rich or poor, but especially if poor, she ought, in a Christian community, to have ample facilities to cultivate and ample room to exercise it.⁶⁶

The month ended with the press offering praise to the new library whose success far exceeded the original expectations of the venture. "The rooms are filled every day with women who desire to avail themselves of its advantages, or with those who feel interested in its success and wish to lend it their aid."⁶⁷ The article went on to say that there have been requests for the library to offer classes similar to those offered by the Mercantile Library Association, and they hoped that this would be possible.⁶⁸ By the end of November the Woman's Library announced that classes in French and German were organized and that they were filling up rapidly.⁶⁹

It appears the novelty of the library wore off, however, no further mention appeared in the press until November 30th when *The New York Times* reported that the news had reached London of the success of the new library. They posed the question of whether a similar library would be suitable for London women.

We strongly believe it would, especially if opened in the evening, when the British Museum and other libraries are closed. Besides, how many poor girls are there who cannot afford fire and candle in the evening to enable them to stop at home after their working-hours are over, and would only be too glad of such a refuge, where they could

improve and amuse themselves, free from importunities, free from temptation, happy, warm and comfortable, until the clock warned them it was time to go to bed? ⁷⁰

A Women's Library was eventually opened in London, but it is questionable whether the New York City venture had anything to do with its founding. The London Library, as it was known at the time, grew out of the London Society for Women's Suffrage which dates to 1867, but it did not actually have a library until 1926 when its first librarian, Vera Douie was appointed. ⁷¹

Not all mentions of the Woman's Library in New York in the press were complimentary. In their December 1860 issue, *Vanity Fair* satirized the new venture in "A Word for the Women."

Some wiseacre, writing about the Woman's Library in New York, delivers himself after this fashion:

"The collection is of very popular character, and is designed for miscellaneous readers, but we hope the time is not far distant when the women of New York will become scholars, and find in their improved library all the intellectual resources which they require."

VANITY FAIR regard this as stuff. Establishing Libraries for women, forsooth? Why not have churches for women; and operas for women; and theaters for women; or special gates through which the dear creatures can enter Heaven? The V.F. enters a solemn protest against cloistering the women in any dingy Library-room, or separating them from the rest of the human-kind in harems, or anything of that disagreeable sort."...VANITY believes that women are quite as capable of turning the Astor to good account as any of the gentlemen who there congregate. ⁷²

Marie E. Zakrzewska a 19th century feminist, abolitionist and pioneering doctor, wrote: " 'A woman's library,' " in any city, is one of the partial measures that I deprecate: so I only partially rejoice over the late establishment of such a library in New York. I look upon it as one of those half-measures which must be endured in the progress of any desired reform;..." ⁷³

Although these were negative comments about the Woman's Library, they were quite progressive, calling for a time when women would be offered equality with men not only in the library but in all other areas of life.

The woman's library maintained a unique place in the library world and mention of it appeared in an 1863 volume by Virginia Penny titled *The Employments of Women: a cyclopedia of woman's work*. "There is a Woman's Library in New York. The object is to furnish women—particularly working women, who are not able to subscribe to other libraries—with a quiet and comfortable place to read in, during their leisure moments."⁷⁴

The library remained in the University Building and active through 1865; the only mention appearing in a newspaper was for a course offering in French in 1864.⁷⁵ The days of the library seemed numbered when in an 1866 article it was noted that a woman's library was opened in the city several years ago but was not prospering due to lack of funds. "I regard the times at present as far more favorable for such an enterprise—experiment I should hardly call it—for if well-conducted there is no doubt that this plan would meet with enthusiastic support from the workingwomen themselves."⁷⁶ At that time the library had moved to 80 White Street where it remained through 1867, when it moved to 44 Franklin. It appears that the Working Women's Protective Union and the Woman's Library by 1866 were both at 44 Franklin Street and the next year, 1867 they had both relocated at 44 Franklin Street and soon to 88 Bleeker Street where both institutions remained until 1883.⁷⁷ It is assumed by this author that in 1866 The Woman's Library, which was suffering financial problems, was taken over by the Working Women's Protective Union. An 1879 publication provides the following entry for the Woman's Library:

Woman's Library, 88 Bleeker St.—This Library is under the control of the Working Women's Protective Union, and contains about 8,000 volumes of history, travels, biography, fiction, and poetry. Any female resident of New York over 18 years of age may have access to the library upon the payment of \$1.50 per annum, which is remitted in cases of persons too poor to pay the fee. Books may be taken home and kept for two weeks. The library was founded in 1861. Open from 9A.M. until 4P.M., Sundays and holidays excepted.⁷⁸

With this change in the Woman's Library autonomy, came a change in its original mission. Once the Working Women's Protective Union took over control of the facility, the hours were limited, and women who worked all day were not able to take advantage of the library or any of the other activities that it offered. After checking New York City directories from the 1870s until 1917, the library moved a few times with the Working Women's Protective Union. However the 1915

directory was the last time the Woman's Library was listed and it disappeared by the time the next directory was published.⁷⁹

The "Woman's Library" remains a footnote to New York City library history, but is significant in that it was part of a social awareness and reform mentality that surfaced during the Civil War. Women began finding their place in a society dominated by men when it came to issues that solely affected them. During the Civil War women participated in the Sanitary Fairs to aid the soldiers and their families, and learned that they could run organizations successfully. After the war many of these women gravitated to social work and improving conditions for working women, children, the poor and the infirm, and the reform movements received momentum.⁸⁰ Miss Powell was ahead of her time advocating for a library for working women in the 1850s. It took over fifty years until the creation of what we know as the New York Public Library and it wasn't until 1901 that branch libraries were funded and the democratization of library services was realized for the citizens of New York City.

¹Rev. Henry Ward Beecher and James T. Brady, Esq., “Addresses on Mental Culture for Women,” in *The Pulpit and Rostum. Sermons, orations, Popular Lectures, &c.* Delivered in New York, October Twenty-Sixth, 1858. (New York: E.D. Barker, January 15, 1859) 28. Google books.

²Miss Catherine E. Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy, for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and At School* (Boston: Thomas H. Webb, and Co. 1843), 36-37. (Google books)

³Christine Stansell, *Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1986),105.

⁴E. M. P. [Porter], “Help for Women—Working in the Wrong Way,” *New York Times*, Nov. 11, 1858, 2.

⁵Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 67-72.

⁶“Working Women’s Protective Union. Meeting at Cooper Institute. Speeches by Judge Daly, Rev. Wm. H. Milburn, and Others,” *New York Times*, March 22, 1864, 5.

⁷Felice Batlan, “The Birth of Legal Aid: Gender Ideologies, Women, and the Bar in New York City, 1863-1910,” *Law and History Review*, 28, (November 2010): 932-938.

⁸J.H.W. Tookey, “Libraries in Workshops for Employes,” *New York Daily Times*, May 13, 1854, 3.

⁹“General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen—Re-opening of the Apprentices’ Library—Improvements in the Rooms, Speeches, Collation,&c &c.,” *New-York Daily Tribune*, September 24, 1850, 1.

¹⁰R. G. Horton, “The Public Libraries of New York,” *American Publishers’ Circular and Literary Gazette*, June 7, 1856, 2,23.

¹¹T.S. Arthur, *Advice to Young Ladies on their Duties and Conduct in Life* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, & Co., 1849), 59-60.

¹²Diana Dizerega Wall, “Examining Gender, Class, and Ethnicity in Nineteenth-Century New York City,” *Historical Archaeology*, 33, no. 1 (1999): 104; Barbara Sicherman, “*Ideologies and Practices of Reading*,” in *A History of the Book in America*, vol. 3 edited by Scott E. Casper,

Jeffrey D. Grooves, Stephen W. Nissenbaum and Michael Winship. Chapel Hill: American Antiquarian Society, 2007, 296.

¹³ Sally Schwager, "Educating Women in America," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 12, (Winter 1987): 339.

¹⁴ *On the Establishment of Public Schools in the City of New-York*. New York: Printed by Mahlon Day, 1825, 17. (Internet Archive)

¹⁵ Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 500, 631, 780-781.

¹⁶ "The Evening Schools of New-York," *New York Daily Times*, September 29, 1856, 4.

¹⁷ Sandra Shoiock Roff, Anthony M. Cucchiara and Barbara Dunlap, *From the Free Academy to CUNY: Illustrating Public Higher Education in New York City, 1847-1997*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2000, 6, 24.

¹⁸ "The Woman's Library," *New York Times*, August 25, 1860,4.

¹⁹ "Women's Libraries," *The Independent...Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts*, 2, no.531 (February 3, 1859), 1.

²⁰ J. B.W. Tookey, "Libraries in Workshops for Employees," letter-to-the-editor, *New-York Daily Times*, May 13, 1854, 3.

²¹ William I. Fletcher, *Public Libraries in America*. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1894, 16-19. (Internet Library)

²² Abigail A. Van Slyck, "The Lady and the Library Loafer: Gender and Public Sphere in Victorian

America," *Winterthur Portfolio*, 31, no. 4 (Winter, 1996): 224-226.

²³ *Ibid*, 228.

²⁴ Phyllis Dain, "American Public Libraries and the Third Sector: Historical Reflections and Implications," *Libraries & Culture*, 31, (Winter, 1996): 58-59.

²⁵ *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Astor Library, for the year 1854*. Albany: C. Jan Benthuyse, no. 407 Broadway, 1855, p.6-7. (google books)

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- ²⁶ “Libraries,” *Trow’s New York City Directory, 1865.*, compiled by H. Wilson (New York: John F. Trow Publisher, 1865), 26.
- ²⁷ Tom Glynn, “Books for a Reformed Republic: The Apprentices’ Library of New York City, 1820-1865,” *Libraries & Culture*, 34, (Fall 1999): 358.
- ²⁸ “Libraries,” *Trow’s New York City Directory, 1865*, 26.
- ²⁹ Thomas Augst, “The Business of Reading in Nineteenth-Century America: The New York Mercantile Library,” *American Quarterly*, 50, no.2 (1998): 280.
- ³⁰ Miss E.M. Powell, “The Needs of Women,” a letter-to-the-editor of *New-York Daily Tribune*, July 19, 1858, 5.
- ³¹ J.G. Holland, “The Popular Lecture,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, 15, (March 1865): 363.
- ³² Donald M. Scott, “The Popular Lecture and the Creation of a Public in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America,” *The Journal of American History*, 66, (March 1980): 792-801.
- ³³ Philip S. Foner, “A Pioneer Proposal for a Women’s Library,” *The Journal of Library History*, 13, no.2 (Spring 1978): 157.
- ³⁴ Cornelius C. Blatchly, “Womem’s [sic] Library,” *Workingman’s Advocate*, January 2, 1830, 1.
- ³⁵ Rev. Henry Ward Beecher and James T. Brady, “Addresses on Mental Culture for Women,” 21.
- ³⁶ *Ibid*: 40.
- ³⁷ E.M.P., “Library for Women.—Help for Women—Working in the Wrong Way,” To the Editor of the New-York Times, *New York Times*, Nov. 11, 1858, 2.
- ³⁸ Elbert S. Porter, “Employment of Women—The Free-LibraryMovement—Letter from the Editor of the Christian Intelligencer,” To the Editor of the New-York Times, *New-York Times*, Nov. 13, 1858, 2.
- ³⁹ E.M.P. “The Woman’s Library—Further Explanation of Its Necessity,” To the Editor of the New-York Times, *The New York Times*, Nov. 25, 1858, 2.
- ⁴⁰ M.M. [?], “The Women’s Library Movement,” To the Editor of the New-York Times, *New York Times*, December 31, 1858, 3.
- ⁴¹ “Women’s Libraries,” *The Independent...Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature and the Arts*, 11, 531 (February 3, 1859), 1.
- ⁴² “The Woman’s Library,” from the *Tribune* in *The New York Times*, (August 25, 1860): 4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ “The Woman’s Library,” *New-York Daily Tribune*, (August 22, 1860), 7.

⁴⁵ James Miller, *Miller’s New York As It Is, Or Stranger’s Guide-Book to the Cities of New York, Brooklyn & Adjacent Places: Comprising Notices of Every Object of Interest to Strangers, Including Public Buildings, Churches, Hotels, Places of Amusement...* New York: J. Miller, 1860, p.25.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 49.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 28.

⁴⁸ Thomas Augst, *The Clerk’s Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in nineteenth-Century America*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003, 162.

⁴⁹ *The First Annual Report of the Trustees of The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art*. January 1, 1860. New York: John F. Trow, 1860, 7, 9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵¹ Miller, 1860, 45-46.

⁵² “The Woman’s Library,” *The New York Times*, (August 25, 1860), 2. Biographical dictionaries were checked as well as the respected volume by Mary A. Livermore, *Great American Women of the 19th Century: A Biographical Encyclopedia* (1897). Many of the women social activists from the mid-19th century later made their mark after the Civil War as reformers and social workers. This author found no evidence of Ms. Powell taking this path.

⁵³ “Raymond, Henry Jarvis,” in Drake, Francis. *Dictionary of American Biography*, (Cambridge: Houghton and Company, 1879): 756-7. Online version.

⁵⁴ *Portraits of the Presidents of the Society 1835-1914: Saint Nicholas Society of the City of New York*. New York: Published by order of the Society, 1914, 37. (Internet Archive—Library of Congress)

⁵⁵ A Joseph T. Howland is listed as a wood engraver in New York City from 1845 to 1858, but it is only speculation that this is the same Joseph Howland who was on the Board of the library. George C. Groce and David H. Wallace, *The New-York Historical Society’s Dictionary of Artists in America 1564-1860*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979, 331.

⁵⁶ “The business of Messrs. Wilson G. Hunt & Co. is the importation of woollen and other goods adapted to men’s wear,—a business in which their long experience has given them peculiar

facilities, and which they have conducted with credit to themselves and advantage to the reputation of the class whom they represent,” in Edward Troxell Freedley, *United States Mercantile Guide. Leading Pursuits and Leading Men. A Treatise on the Principal Trades and the Manufacturers of the United States, Showing the Progress, State and Prospects of Business*. Philadelphia: Edward Young, 1856, 212.

⁵⁷ James D. McCabe Jr., *Great Fortunes, and How They Were Made: or the Struggles and Triumphs of Our Self-Made Men*. [Waiheke Island]: The Floating Press, 2008, 159. Original edition published in 1871.

⁵⁸ “The Woman’s Library,” *Christian Inquirer*, Dec. 29, 1860, 3.

⁵⁹ “The Woman’s Library. Its Formal Inauguration,” *New York Times*, October 2, 1860, 8

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ “The Woman’s Library,” *New York Evangelist*, 31, no. 40 (Oct. 4, 1860): 5.

⁶² *Catalogue of Books in the Woman’s Library of New York*. New York: Baptist and Taylor, 1861, 3. [New-York Historical Society Library]

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁶⁵ “The Prince of Wales,” *New-York Daily Tribune*, October 13, 1860, 5.

⁶⁶ “Visit of Lady Franklin to the Woman’s Library,” *New York Times*, October 26, 1860, 8.

⁶⁷ “The Woman’s Library,” *The New York Times*, October 27, 1860, 4.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ “The Woman’s Library,” *New York Times*, November 26, 1860, 4.

⁷⁰ “Our English Friends Following a Good Example,” *New York Times*, November 30, 1860, 5.

⁷¹ Antonia Byatt, “The Woman’s Library,” *History Today*, 52, 2 (February 2002):2-3.

⁷² “A Word for the Women,” *Vanity Fair*, Volume 2, December 1, 1860, 272.

⁷³ Caroline H. Dall, ed. *A Practical illustration of “Woman’s right to labor;” or, A letter from Marie E. Zakrzewska*, Boston: Walker, Wise and Co., 1860,7. (Internet Archive—Library of Congress)

⁷⁴ Virginia Penny, *The Employments of Women: a cyclopedia of woman’s work*. Boston: Walker, Wise and Company, 1863, 19. (Internet Archive—Library of Congress)

⁷⁵ *Trow's New York City Directory*, 1860-1, 1861-2, 1863-4, 1864-5. "Woman's Library," *New-York Daily Tribune*, April 18, 1864, 2.

⁷⁶ "The Workingwomen of New York," *New York Sun*, Oct. 4, 1866, 2.

⁷⁷ *Trow's New York City Directory*, 1866-67, 1867-68, 1868-69, 1869-70, 1872-73, 1873-4, 1882.

⁷⁸ D. Appleton, *Appleton's Dictionary of New York and Its Vicinity*. New York: D. Appleton, 1879, 238.

⁷⁹ *Trow's New York City Directory*, assorted volumes for 1870-1916.

⁸⁰ Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. 7-10.