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# Historical Background

LOIS K. SCHOCHET

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE STATUS of the library trustee throughout history reflects the growth of the library as a significant cultural institution from ancient times to the present. It is difficult to discuss one without examining the other.

Trustees disseminated reading material, protected the staff, and fostered the growth of ancient libraries. Instances of the generosity and industriousness of the first trustees can be found in Greece and Rome. Sometime in the period between 200 and 175 B.C., the wealthy citizens of Cos subscribed to the erection of a library building and contributed to a book purchase fund or donated books. Public libraries in Rome in the second century were administered by a *procurator bibliothecarum* in the name of the emperor. This post was usually held by a recognized scholar. A group of libraries was governed by a director, and each *bibliothecarius* was responsible to him.<sup>1</sup>

During the Middle Ages, monks were appointed by the abbot to supervise the books of the monastic libraries. St. Benedict, who founded the monastery of Mount Cassino, took special care that each newly established cloister had a library. The Benedictine monks managed these libraries and originated definite hours for their use. Libraries were also established by the Augustinian monks who wrote instructions for binding, repairing, cataloging, and shelving their volumes. The Carthusian brothers opened their libraries to the public and lent books to responsible citizens against security.<sup>2</sup>

The nobles of the court were most likely the trustees of the royal libraries of the Renaissance. France's Bibliothèque Nationale had been founded by Charles V in 1365. During the next three centuries, the library was governed by the nobles of the court and head librarians. Gifts of books rather than funds were solicited, and in many instances, books were not requested but were seized from conquered countries. In 1623 Maximilian of Bavaria presented the Palatine collection to the

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Mrs. Schochet is in the Science and Industry Department, St. Paul Public Library.

Pope for the Vatican's library. The old bindings were replaced by new vellum with the inscription, "I am from that library which Maximilian, Duke of Bavaria, took as a prize of war from captured Heidelberg and sent as a trophy to Gregory XV."<sup>3</sup> A similar technique was employed by Napoleon, who enriched the holdings of the *Bibliothèque Nationale* by confiscating the choice contents of libraries in Germany, Italy, Spain, and Austria.

The most important developments in the history of libraries and trustees in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries took place in America. New England was the colonial leader in bookselling and publishing, and its citizens naturally turned to books to fill their leisure hours. Enjoying companionship, these New England men founded the social library. However, the social library was not an American innovation; rather, its idea derived from a number of different sources, the most important of which were the book clubs and gentlemen's societies known in Britain in the early eighteenth century.

Shera<sup>4</sup> defines the social library as "a voluntary association of individuals who had contributed money toward a common fund to be used for the purchase of books." In these libraries acquisitions were financed by group investments or by annual dues paid by each member. Social libraries were either (a) proprietary or (b) subscription or association libraries. Proprietary libraries were common-law partnerships based upon the joint-stock principle, whereby members owned shares of the property. The subscription library was a common-law corporation. Members paid an annual fee for service but did not own the property of the library.<sup>5</sup> Overlapping existed between the two types, for many of the proprietary libraries permitted yearly subscriptions by persons who were not share-owners.

While men of wealth and property were served by the proprietary and subscription libraries, less fortunate citizens were served by other association libraries. The mercantile libraries were used by the young merchants' clerks; the artisan class patronized the mechanics' or apprentices' libraries. In addition, there were even religious subscription libraries such as those of the Young Men's Christian Association and the Catholic Young Men's Association.

The members of the social libraries elected permanent boards of trustees or directors to manage these institutions. While the conferred powers varied from board to board, they usually included the appointment, dismissal, and payment of officers and employees; the purchase of books, equipment and supplies; and occasionally the renting of

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buildings. Often the actions of the board members were approved or rejected by the association.

As there were class differences between the men who belonged to the proprietary and subscription libraries and those who used the mechanics' and mercantile associations, sharp distinction can be found between the trustees of the two groups. The board members of the proprietary libraries were often prominent social and political figures. For example, Josiah Quincy, Jr., William H. Prescott, and Oliver Wendell Holmes served on the Boston Athenaeum Board around 1850. The trustees of the mechanics' and mercantile libraries were younger and less prominent than the board members of the proprietary libraries. Since many of the mechanics' group were minors, there was some skepticism as to their ability to manage important institutions. In some cases, partial control was given to other boards composed of older men.<sup>6</sup>

The proprietary and subscription libraries derived their governing power from the prevailing corporate form of organization.<sup>7</sup> This form was not an American invention; by the seventeenth century, it was already an important aspect of English constitutional law. Corporations existed in many commercial and industrial ventures between England and her colonies; examples included the fishing, whaling, banking, trading, and manufacturing industries.

The corporation as an institutional form seemed to be ideally suited to the economic, geographic, and social environment of the colonies. Massachusetts and New England towns were at first corporations, with charters similar to the early medieval grants. Like free constitutions, they regulated the laws of the town's and state's citizens. Many private corporations performed public functions that later became the responsibility of governmental agencies, especially with regard to public utilities. Beyond the realm of public utilities, religious, charitable, and educational institutions such as Harvard and Yale were incorporated. Furthermore, the law of contract pervaded every aspect of colonial life: Puritans made covenants with God, and the Calvinists conceived of all aspects of life as being governed and controlled by legal contracts.

Thus, it was natural that when the colonists wanted to establish libraries, they did not search for a new system of government. Rather, they turned to familiar and established institutions, and modified the corporate form so that it would best serve their particular interests.<sup>8</sup>

Proprietary and subscription libraries were organized as legal corpo-

rations under special charters or statutes. Before the Revolution, libraries had received their charters from their colonial governors. After 1783, they were usually incorporated by special acts of the state legislatures. The statutes provided the corporation with definite powers and responsibilities: (1) perpetual succession, (2) ownership and disposal of real and personal property, (3) authority to receive donations, bequests, and subscriptions, (4) the right to sue and be sued, (5) a common seal, (6) the privilege of holding meetings at designated intervals, (7) election of officers and a board of control, and (8) formulation and execution of by-laws and rules and regulations. The Redwood Library Company of Newport was probably the first library to become a corporation.<sup>9</sup>

Library officials discovered in time that the powers granted in the original charters were not specific enough and needed clarification and expansion. Consequently, state legislatures enacted laws allowing the officers of libraries to formulate regulations for the management of their collections. New York in 1796 was the first state to pass such detailed legislation. Between 1798 and 1839, Massachusetts, Vermont, Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island passed library laws that ranged from the general to the specific. During this period of forty years, the corporate form as a tool of business enterprise and the social library as a part of the corporate pattern were becoming more prevalent in American society. As the corporate form increased in popularity, there was less need for long, specific regulations.<sup>10</sup>

While social libraries dominated the eighteenth and the first part of the nineteenth centuries, they were by no means the only form of library government; county, school-district, and municipal libraries were also established in this period of American history. According to the first constitution of the state of Indiana, adopted in 1816, as new counties were created, provisions were included whereby "library companies" might be established in the county seats. Under legislation passed in 1824, citizens of counties of that state in which libraries had been established were empowered to elect boards to manage their libraries.<sup>11</sup>

The New York state legislature passed the first state law providing for tax supported free library service in the school districts. The librarian was elected annually by the tax payers, and he was responsible to the trustees of the district, acting as trustees of the library.<sup>12</sup>

Just as the citizens of New England had established and fostered the growth of the social libraries, New Englanders again began the

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first municipal libraries. In 1803, Caleb Bingham, Boston bookseller, sent 150 books to his brother Daniel in Salisbury, Connecticut. He wrote Daniel that when he was younger, he had wanted to read but had had no access to a library. Thinking that many children also longed for reading material, he wanted to help them. Subsequently, the Bingham Library for Youth was founded and placed under the control of a self-perpetuating board of trustees. In 1810, the town's citizens voted that one hundred dollars should be paid to the trustees to purchase more books. The Bingham Library was the first example of a municipality actively contributing financial assistance to public library service.<sup>13</sup>

Eighteen years later the New Hampshire legislature declared that its Literary fund was to be distributed to its towns for educational purposes. Most towns used this money to improve their public schools, but the citizens of Peterborough decided to employ these funds to establish a free public library. Three trustees were placed in charge of the small collection. Peterborough was the first library supported from the beginning by public funds, and it was the first instance in which the use of books was free to all classes of the community.<sup>14</sup>

The first state law in America authorizing establishment of a municipal public library was passed in 1848 by the General Court of Massachusetts. However, no governmental machinery was created for the library, for the state law merely allowed Boston to establish an agency under the city council's regulations.<sup>15</sup>

Two possibilities existed: the first was to place the library directly under the control of the council, administered by a single officer; the second was to place the library under board control. The city government of Boston in 1848 contained both types of administration. While there were five appointed boards and an elected school committee, many of the city's activities were supervised by thirty-three committees under the direction of the council.<sup>16</sup>

At first a special committee of the city council managed the new public library. Later five citizens were added to form the first board of trustees. It should be noted that the trustees of the Boston Public Library were influenced by the existing structure of the Boston Athenaeum, for the mayor, four of the five citizen trustees, and five of the seven council members were proprietors of the Athenaeum. Obviously, these men modeled the government of the Boston Library after the board form of the Athenaeum.<sup>17</sup>

An ordinance passed in 1852 provided that the Library would be

controlled by a Board of Trustees made up of one alderman, one member of the Common Council, and five citizens chosen annually by both houses of the City Council. The 1852 ordinance committed Boston to the library board plan of management. This example was followed in many cities and towns as new public libraries were founded.<sup>18</sup>

Specific powers granted to the trustees by the ordinance included the control of library funds, the authority to prescribe rules and regulations for the use of the library, and the right to appoint subordinate officers. The one governmental check over the board was the city council's authority to appoint the librarian annually and to decide his salary. In later history this check proved to be troublesome.<sup>18</sup>

The trustees were resolute and fought for complete independence from city council control. The board objected to the city council's authority to renew or reject the librarian's appointment each year. It was not until 1870 that the librarian's tenure was made permanent. The trustees also opposed the council's interference in regulating certain library salaries. In 1877, Justin Winsor, disgusted with this situation, resigned from the Boston Library to become librarian of Harvard University. Because of the pressures of the Examining Committee of the Library and the trustees, a special statute was passed the following year; the "Trustees of the Public Library of the City of Boston" were incorporated and were given full powers over the library and its property. Moreover, the trustees' term of office was increased to five years. In addition to establishing the management of its library by board control, Boston also confirmed the tradition of broad powers and almost complete independence of the board.<sup>19</sup>

As these early boards instituted important reforms, the first trustees of the Boston Public Library may be regarded as social reformers. They aimed to elevate the educational level of the great masses of Boston who could not afford to buy books. The trustees thought of themselves as missionaries spreading the gospel of mental culture. While most of the trustees of the first public libraries were dedicated and humanitarian leaders, exceptions may be noted in the directors of the Astor and Lenox Libraries of New York. The members of the Astor Board of Directors were usually conservative aristocrats. Joseph Cogswell, for instance, tried to transcend his snobbish principles, but he insisted upon keeping the bookstacks closed to the readers, for he was afraid that a crowd would throw everything into confusion.<sup>20</sup>

The Astor's self-perpetuating board always included a member of the Astor family. These wealthy men were not the most scholarly of

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gentlemen, nor were they always interested in a public library. It was no wonder, then, that changes in the library's policies were difficult and slow.<sup>21</sup>

James Lenox had founded a library for scholars; while the trustees may have wanted to make the library more popular, they were obligated to execute the founder's wishes. In addition, these trustees were New York professional or business men, friends of Lenox, or at least family connections. The public reacted to the arrogance of the Lenox trustees. A satirical dialogue which appeared in "Popular Science Catechism," one of the *Life* series, contained these lines:

But I thought you said it was a public library?  
So I did.

Then how can they keep people out?  
By locking the doors.

But why?  
To keep the pretty books from being spoiled.

Gracious! What are all those brass things on the roof?  
Cannon dear.

What are they for?  
To blow the heads off students who want to get in.

Why! and see those gallows!  
Yes dear.

And people hanging!  
Certainly, sweet.

Who are they?  
Students who got in.<sup>22</sup>

The directors of the Astor and Lenox libraries represent only two examples of aristocratic conservatism. During the first half of the nineteenth century, trustees and founders of American libraries were liberal and industrious in their attempts to establish good library service. Critics did condemn local government on charges of corruption, graft, and inefficiency; however, the spoils system did not usually affect libraries. For the most part, librarians and trustees were academicians and civic leaders.

Leading citizens had persuaded governments to authorize and finance the Bingham, Peterborough, and Boston libraries, three important institutions established during the first half of the nineteenth century. Between 1849 and 1890, the trend in state government

seemed to be enactment of special laws that provided for new services as they arose. Consequently, when a city decided it needed a library, special legislation established an institution, and a new board or commission was added to the city to administer the library.

Two types of local law were enacted during this period. One type, first passed by New Hampshire in 1849, was known as the "short" law. It succinctly stated that the town meeting or city council had the authority to pass rules and regulations to establish a library. While the "short" law was so open-ended that any form of government could have been created, all local units chose the standardized plan of board control.<sup>23</sup>

The contrasting form of legislation was the "long" law type passed by Illinois in 1872. The unwritten plan of board control was put into legal form. This type of law made the appointment of trustees obligatory, gave them a three-year term of office, and enumerated their powers. The library was to be independent of the city council except in the area of taxation. This form of legislation was popular in many states during the third quarter of the nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, two new trends appeared in American local government: municipal home rule developed, and an attempt was made to establish a strong central administrative authority. Municipal governments were of three kinds: strong-mayor, commission, and council-manager.<sup>24</sup>

While the strong-mayor form of government had little effect upon the public library, the commission plan challenged its existing structure. Board members were concerned about their future status under the city commission plan; they did not know to whom they would be responsible or even if library boards would be retained. The varying solutions to these problems did not always work to the benefit of the boards. While Iowa and Illinois amended their commission government laws to reconcile them with library laws, Sacramento, California, abolished its library board altogether. The librarian there was placed under the authority of the commissioner of education.<sup>25</sup>

Because of the special legal character of many libraries, manager government after 1890 did not greatly alter the position of the library. Existing forms were not overthrown, but as Joeckel observes, "a steady pounding-away at the library defenses has produced noticeable results."<sup>26</sup>

While local governments affected the nature of the municipal libraries in the first decades of the twentieth century, they did not

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interfere with the structure of the association libraries. These institutions did not completely disappear after their great importance in the nineteenth century; in 1935, fifty-six association libraries still existed. At this time, their boards were very powerful, for they were responsible to no outside authority. The trustees received gifts, purchased all books, appointed employees and determined their salaries, and made rules and regulations for the library. Being separated from the municipal government, these trustees were free from civic controls and political influences.

In addition to the association libraries, school district public libraries could also be found in the early twentieth century. At this time about a third of the libraries in Ohio were survivals of the old district type. In the twenties, new libraries were established in districts where the promise of financial support seemed to be greater than it would have been in municipalities. In 1923 an amendment was passed to the Ohio district library law, making the appointment of a separate library board mandatory. Thus, the new libraries were part of the school district system, but were not under the board of education. While in many cases, the board of education appointed the library trustees, the former board had almost no power over the library. These boards, consequently, were very strong, for they had full responsibility over finances, property, and salaries.<sup>27</sup>

From the Colonial beginnings of American public libraries to the present, boards have been instrumental in founding libraries and fostering their growth. If the trustees were liberal and industrious, as in the case of the Boston Library, the institutions prospered and were enthusiastically received by the public. However, if the trustees were conservative and indifferent, as in the examples of the Astor and Lenox libraries, the public also reacted and showed its scorn. Library boards in the rest of the world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have not been as powerful nor as influential as their American counterparts.

Library boards in other nations have often decreased in power and influence. New Zealand's Public Libraries Act of 1869 provided that management of libraries be vested in the local governing body of the district. A subsequent act in 1908 gave power to either local authorities or trustees to formulate and control public libraries. However, the trend of administration has been towards the local government; trustee-controlled libraries have often been replaced by local authority control.<sup>28</sup>

Certain libraries, such as those in Czechoslovakia, had library boards whose policies were approved or rejected by a higher governmental authority. This nation, in 1919, passed a special law for public communal libraries; boards were created independent of the communal administration. Citizens of the community elected four to eight members of the board; those elected and the secretary of the local commission for adult education chose the remainder of the members from regular borrowers. The trustees served for two years, and their powers included appointing the librarian and his citizens, deciding upon the librarian's suggestions for the purchase of new books, adopting regulations for the borrowing of books and using the reading room, and presenting a written report of its activities to the representatives of the community.<sup>29</sup>

While the librarian had an advisory vote on the board, the Ministry of Education and library instructors controlled the administration of the library. Instructors and inspectors confirmed the appointment of the librarian, and the ministry had the power to dissolve the board and to appoint a temporary directing body. For sufficient reasons, the Ministry could remove certain members of the board and appoint new ones.<sup>30</sup>

Independent library boards in Argentina have been supervised by the National Commission. Domingo F. Sarmiento, an Argentine educational leader, visited the United States and was impressed with Ticknor's idea of the popular library. Under his presidency in 1870, a law was passed creating a National Commission entrusted with the foundation, organization, and aid of popular libraries throughout the country. By 1876, one-hundred and fifty-six libraries were founded under the Commission's trusteeship. Caught up in civil wars and revolutions, Argentinians lost interest in public libraries. The Commission ceased to exist, but in the early years of the twentieth century, it was recreated. The National Commission has visited villages and persuaded the citizens to elect committees to establish and administer book centers. This valuable institution has also helped to finance libraries and has even distributed free books to the village libraries.<sup>31</sup>

Library boards in many European countries are called committees or inspecting bodies. Bulgaria's Library Act of 1927 provided for the maintenance of public libraries. The affairs of a book center were governed by an elected library committee and were usually confirmed by the Ministry of Public Education. According to the provisions of Belgium's Library Act of 1921, inspecting bodies were

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created to supervise and administer the work of libraries. These bodies aided the librarian in the selection of books.<sup>32</sup>

In Scandanavia, the library board's decisions are approved by the city council. The council organizes the library and appropriates money for building and operating expenses. It also appoints a library committee to act as an intermediary between the librarian and the proper municipal administration. In addition, the city council fixes salaries and makes all important appointments acting upon suggestions of the librarian and the committee. Matters pertaining to bylaws, salaries, appointments, and distribution of funds must come before the mayor and council for final action.<sup>33</sup>

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Scandanavian boards consisted of prominent citizens who had been selected for their literary and social interests or financial influences. Today city legislators select members of their own political parties. Consequently, a board member's personal interest in the library and its work may be secondary to his political beliefs.<sup>34</sup>

While the composition of Scandanavian library boards has changed significantly in the past sixty years, the functions of American library boards have been altered just as markedly. Advocates of the American library board system of government, at this time, do not usually think of management by the board. Rather, they think in terms of general oversight, policy regulation, public relations, and appraisal of management. However, the men responsible for framing library laws had a different concept of the responsibilities of the board.<sup>35</sup>

Early library laws did not distinguish between the policy-regulating functions of the board and the management functions of the executive. One U.S. statute empowered the trustees to purchase books, magazines, and periodicals. A California law authorized trustees to borrow, lend, and exchange books with other libraries. On the other hand, the librarian or executive officer was rarely mentioned in early library legislation.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, the library of the nineteenth century was completely under trustee control, and the librarian was merely the instrument of the board. As has been shown, the trustees were legally responsible for the library building, the furniture and equipment, books and periodicals, and the investment of all finances. The townspeople looked to the trustees to perform all of these duties, as well as to direct the operating activities of the library. The librarian, then, was only the custodian of the library, for he did nothing "professional." Rather, he

saw to it that books were circulated, fines were collected, and the library's rules were enforced.

While nineteenth-century trustees were well educated and distinguished citizens, there was a lack of adequately trained librarians at that time. Salaries were low, and in most communities the vocation was only a local consideration, for librarianship was not yet a profession of national stature. The trustees were naturally reluctant to give too much power to the untrained librarians available in those days.<sup>36</sup>

By the second decade of this century, librarianship was recognized as a very important profession. In the thirties, more laws enumerated the functions of the librarian. At the same time, libraries had been expanding their resources and services. Close trustee direction was no longer possible. Trustees stopped managing and started creating policy.

Today the library board's main purpose is to serve as a lay check on professional knowledge. Its main responsibilities are to determine the policy of the library and to select a competent librarian. The boards of libraries, schools, and business corporations decide policy, while the appointed librarians, superintendents, and presidents execute policy. While results differ, today all types of boards share the same goals and responsibilities. The same relationship between trustees and executives also exists in all of these boards.

It has been shown that library boards of the nineteenth century had more authority than the librarian. The same type of situation existed in early school board history. The first education boards performed many of the duties of the present-day superintendent and principal. School trustees selected and supervised the teacher, chose text books, decided curricula, and looked after the school facilities. As the schools grew, the superintendent was permitted to help select teachers, supervise their work, and discipline students. Finally, with much reluctance on the part of the board, the superintendent was given the financial responsibilities. The board of education assigned more and more duties to the superintendent, and he became a professional person, trained for his job.<sup>37</sup>

Parallels may also be found in early business history. When most companies were small, directors, executives, and stockholders were one group. One individual often held all three positions. As the companies grew in size and distributed more stockholdings, stockholders elected directors to represent them.<sup>38</sup> Since the separation of manage-

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ment from ownership, the role of the business board has changed greatly. Now stockholdings are widely distributed, and the trustees are responsible for the whole enterprise and are no longer merely concerned with the interests of a special group of administrators.<sup>39</sup>

Of course, library, education, and business boards differ because of the nature of the institutions they represent. However, all trustees share the same goals: to maintain a competent staff and to develop the highest possible degree of operating efficiency. All are responsible to the general public.

As Sorenson has pointed out, "Citizen boards keep democracy green at its roots. They are an important index of our national vitality. Boards of directors and committees are evidence that American social-service policy is not in the hands of professional experts alone, that cross-sections of homefolks are in control."<sup>40</sup> Finally, Sorenson has emphasized the great importance of all trustees by stating that "Exercising power vested in them by charters and popular votes of their constituencies, the boards of directors in the United States have become our guidance, our leadership, and our control in almost every phase of our human activities."<sup>41</sup>

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11. Joeckel, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-14.
13. Shera, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-160.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 158-169 *passim*.
15. Joeckel, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

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17. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 143-144.
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