Public Libraries in the New York Metropolitan Area

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New York is unique among American cities in that the five boroughs which comprise the city proper are served by three distinct and separate library systems: the Brooklyn Public Library, The New York Public Library (serving the boroughs of Manhattan, the Bronx, and Richmond), and the Queens Borough Public Library. Furthermore, these libraries are not an integral part of the city government organizational structure, but rather are quasi-public institutions which provide library service by contract. All three library systems were founded in their present corporate form by special acts of the New York State Legislature between 1895 and 1907, and each operates under its own charter, its own board of trustees, and its own director. To complicate the picture further, the New York Public Library is subdivided into two parts and of these only the Circulation Department, or branch library system, is supported by public funds. The Reference Department, dedicated to scholarly research and located in the 5th Avenue and 42nd Street building behind the famous lions, is supported almost wholly by private funds derived from endowments and gifts to the New York Public Library, Astor, Tilden, and Lenox Foundations. The Brooklyn Public Library, the Queens Borough Public Library, and the Circulation Department of the New York Public Library are dependent on city tax levy funds and certain funds from the state of New York to finance their operating expenses. They depend on capital budget funds from the city to maintain their building programs.

The organizational distinctions between the three library systems are little known or understood by the public they serve, for the libraries follow similar service patterns, have shared aims, and mutual problems. Their staffs work under a common classification scheme and a The author is Chief of the Circulation Department, The New York Public Library.
common salary plan. Together they have 2,226,687 registered borrowers, and circulate 32,085,084 volumes annually from a total of 7,786,505 volumes in 187 branches and nine bookmobiles. In 1963/64 they received a total of $22,492,038 in public funds, $18,756,579 from the city, and $3,735,459 from the state of New York. In this same fiscal period, the Reference Department of the New York Public Library operated on a private funds budget of $4,995,292 supplemented by a special grant of $671,588 from the state, and by a contribution from the city of $396,855 towards the maintenance of the central building.

In 1898 an Act of Consolidation united the city of Brooklyn, the city of New York including Bronx County, Long Island City and parts of Nassau County, and the county of Richmond, and thus established the limits of the 319.8 square miles which constitute New York City as it is today. The population of the city more than doubled from 1900 to 1930, and in 1950 reached a peak close to eight million people. Much of this growth was attributable in the early years to transatlantic migration. In 1910, 80 per cent of the city's population was foreign born or of foreign parentage and was concentrated in Manhattan and Brooklyn. With growing financial prosperity and a continuing process of Americanization, families over a period of years moved outward from the heart of the city in ever widening circles, seeking less crowded housing and the general amenities which come with more living space. Gradually, the other three boroughs were filled, and in the period immediately following World War II, the rural counties beyond the city limits mushroomed into suburbs of relatively high population density.

Between 1950 and 1960 this pace quickened, and 900,000 of the predominantly white middle class left the city for the suburbs and were replaced by 800,000 underprivileged newcomers, primarily Negroes from the southern states and Puerto Ricans. Like earlier immigrants they settled for the most part in Brooklyn and Manhattan, and are beginning now to fan outward as they gain an economic and social foothold in the life of the area. In marked contrast to their predecessors, the new group were United States citizens when they arrived in New York, although many speak no English, and others are illiterate or nearly so. These families are largely in the low income group and have had problems of ill health, poor housing, and unemployment. They are unaccustomed to seek either help or recreation in the resources of the public library. On the other hand, the exurbanites they replaced have carried with them to the suburbs the ingrained reading and study habits which they developed in the relatively well-
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stocked and professionally-staffed metropolitan libraries. They expect and demand similar services in the new community.

To meet these demands for library service, individual local libraries in the suburban counties have joined together into voluntary "systems." Under this plan it has been possible for each local library to retain its autonomy and yet benefit from the economies of centralized acquisition and technical processing. In addition, the libraries are able to draw upon the professional guidance of specialists attached to the system's headquarter staff and to augment local book stocks with loans from a strong central book reserve.

The inevitable changes which came with shifting populations have brought financial problems to the city and to the suburbs alike. Within the city, the proportion of children under working age and of old people is on the increase with a smaller wage earning group to support them. In the suburbs young families predominate, and these areas find it difficult to increase local tax rates sufficiently to keep abreast of the ever-growing demands for more schools, increased library facilities, and other public services.

Each year it becomes more difficult to draw sharp lines of demarcation between the city and the surrounding suburban and rural areas. Exact geographical boundaries and areas of governmental jurisdiction are well-established, but growing federal and state financial aid and a population which becomes increasingly mobile make boundaries no longer as sharply defined nor as mutually exclusive as they once were. Furthermore, the social, cultural, and economic life of the city and that of its surrounding suburbs are so interrelated and so interdependent that it is hard to say where one area starts and another stops, or who is a New Yorker and who is not. In this continuing pattern of migration and change lie many of the problems which libraries of both the city and the suburbs must face and solve. No discussion of current library trends in the New York area can minimize the importance of these three predominant factors: migration, changes within the population, and the problems of increased need for financial support.

Librarians in the New York area recognize that they must adjust their sights to meet a span of public use that no longer has a great middle block of average readers. They must attract, serve, and encourage the very limited reader as well as the reader in need of increasingly complex reference and research materials. They have become painfully aware of the illiteracy in their midst, of the school drop outs, and of technological advances which continue to eliminate the
need for unskilled labor and conversely increase the need for the skilled worker. Schools within the last few years are placing increased emphasis on reading, and are making "independent research" a teaching tool used from the lowest elementary grades through college. Librarians and teachers recognize their professional obligation to encourage the skill of reading. They realize that they cannot subscribe to the American complacency that everyone today in the northeast, at least, is literate.

The traditional book collection is no longer adequate but must be extended. At one end of the scale its reference tools must be strengthened and increased, while circulating materials in the non-fiction categories, especially in the sciences, must be greatly broadened, increased, and kept current. At the other extreme, materials for readers with limited skill must be supplied. Such materials for adults and young adults alike have been extremely difficult to find and only in the past year have begun to be available to any satisfactory degree. These books must have a mature, practical approach in terms of the user's cultural understanding and scale of values. They must not only match the attractive packaging and merchandising of competitive wares but also hold out the promise of economic and social betterment to those who make the effort to conquer the skill of reading.

The New York City Board of Education has recognized its long-standing need for curriculum-oriented libraries in elementary schools and has pressed its cause for budget increases to make these facilities available. In the last three years, under this accelerated program, it has added 525 librarian positions to its elementary school staff. In spite of this, public libraries with their longer hours of service continue to be crowded with students preparing school assignments. Representatives of the school libraries and of the public libraries have held joint meetings to discuss their relationship to each other and to review the responsibilities of each to the student. They recognize that in the competition for public funds each type of library has a reason for being, but each must justify the careful expenditure of its budget and its energies.

As a balance for the increased number of the functionally illiterate is the tremendous increase in the number of students attending colleges and universities. In New York City alone, an estimated 245,545 students attend thirty-three public and private institutions of higher learning. Many of these students attend classes on a part-time basis earning their education in and around the hours devoted to earning a
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living. They commute with frantic earnestness from home, to job, to class. The leisurely academic tempo within hallowed ivy-covered halls is not for them. They have no long hours to spend in the college library, even if it were large enough to accommodate them all. They pressure public libraries near their home or job, just as do their younger brothers and sisters, to supply the books and the bibliographical tools they require; and students today require a great deal more and in greater depth than did their counterparts of twenty-five years ago.

Several comprehensive studies within the last few years have been devoted to an assessment of this ever-growing need for increased reference collections and service on the college level. Most notable are two by the Nelson Associates, *Prospects for Library Cooperation in New York City* and *Brooklyn, a Center of Learning*, and Rice Estes' survey of Brooklyn libraries, *A Study of Seven Academic Libraries and their Cooperative Potential*. It is disappointing that recommendations and proposals to aid and increase library resources and information services of an advanced nature have not been successful in passing the state legislature. However, the need is great and continuing public interest encourages optimism for the future of this cause.

The New York Public Library, alarmed at the inroads made by students at the expense of all other users on the tremendous and irreplaceable collections of its Reference Department, has found it necessary to discourage undergraduate student use of its research facilities. In 1961 it purchased, with private funds, a large commercial building across from its central building on Fifth Avenue, and plans to open within the next two years a subject library of both reference and circulating materials. The collection will have approximately 500,000 volumes selected particularly with the needs of the undergraduate student in mind. The city of New York has agreed to support the operating costs of this unique branch library. This venture represents one library's constructive effort to meet student pressure by a cooperative plan of private and public financing.

Libraries, whether in the suburbs or in the city, have increased tremendously the dollar total of their budgets in order to meet the rising costs of books, services, and maintenance. Library endowments, where they exist, and local tax monies are no longer sufficient to meet pyramiding costs. More and more frequently, harassed officials look toward state and federal sources for financial relief. For the past twenty years in New York State, there has been concerted effort by librarians, trustees, and government and education officials to establish some in-
increased form of financial help to libraries in order that the people of this state may have access to more and better library services. It was a difficult uphill effort, but in 1958 the Education Law was amended to provide a greatly increased base for state aid to libraries. Sufficient funds were not immediately provided under the revised law, but in 1960 the legislature voted the necessary appropriation which made full implementation a reality.

The most important concepts of the 1958 act (Laws of New York, 1958, pp. 2074-2084) are: reaffirmation of the systems concept of library cooperation, a commitment to the multi-county concept where populations are limited, the obligation of local initiative and responsibility, a recognition of the important value of strong central libraries, the encouragement and practice of interlibrary loans, and a liberalized state aid formula providing an annual grant of a 30¢ per capita minimum increasing to a maximum of 50¢, and matching to that level expenditures by system libraries for library materials.

It goes without saying that the impact of increased state aid was almost beyond belief. In the New York City area alone, public response was overwhelming. The Nassau, Suffolk, Westchester, and Ramapo Catskill Library Systems were established and the operating budgets of the three public library systems within New York City were increased appreciably. Interest continues in seeking ways to improve on the gains achieved under state aid. A study of the library systems in New York State is being conducted by the Research Division of the State Education Department in order to determine what achievements public libraries have made since 1958 and what factors were vital to, or served to deter, this progress.

Passage of the Amendment in 1964 to the Federal Library Services and Construction Act of 1962 (P.L. 88-269, USC Title 20 §§ 351-358) offered further proof of public interest in libraries and of continuing recognition by the government of the value of library services to the general welfare. This act has broader implications for libraries in the New York urban area than did earlier federal aid legislation which was intended primarily to extend library service to hitherto unserved rural areas. With financial grants under the terms of this act, libraries in and around New York City expect to concentrate studies and programs on various types of service to the disadvantaged citizen; to carry forward present interest in the application of data processing equipment to library procedures in order to save staff, to effect economies, and to give quicker, more accurate service; to continue to study
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the relation of school libraries and public libraries; and to be compensated in part for the construction of some new buildings.

Library systems in the New York metropolitan area have high hopes for the years ahead. They do not profess to have all the answers to the problems they face, but they have reassessed their goals and are moving toward them in a cooperative effort with more united interest and with the expectation of broader financial support than was possible in the past. It is a period of birth and rebirth, of critical self-study, and of analysis of their standards, techniques, and procedures. No one has any doubt that the public libraries of 1975 will be very different from those of today, but it is expected that they will combine the advantages of new methods and new materials with the traditional ideals of public service.

References


