

When \$2 bought a library membership

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The residents of Chelmsford are very fortunate to have excellent public libraries, but it was not always so.

It was not until 1794 that we had any kind of circulating library. In retrospect, this is not too surprising when one realizes that it was just 63 years earlier that Benjamin Franklin had opened the first subscription library in the United States.

The Rev. Hezekiah Packard of the First Parish Church was instrumental in establishing the Chelmsford Social Library in January of that year. This was, of course, before the advent of free public libraries, so membership was granted to those who could raise \$2.00 to join, plus annual dues of 25 cents.

In 1812 the library was incorporated under the name "Proprietors of The Social Library, in the Town of Chelmsford." At that time there were about 80 members and the shares were worth \$3.50.

History tells us that "of the first 93 books purchased, but 12 could be classed as fiction. Moral, religious, and philosophical works predominated, relieved by a few volumes of poetry, or of voyages and travel."

The first librarian in town was Oliver Barrow who operated the local tavern where he kept the books. As each new librarian was named, the collection was moved to his house.

Simeon Spaulding was librarian for a year, then the books found a home at the parsonage for a while, then Capt. Caleb Abbot had them at his house for an ex-

The way It was

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tended period of time.

After a period of frequent moves, no suitable place could be found and the books were put into storage, precluding circulation. Eventually a room was set aside in the Town Hall to serve as the library.

The book collection grew slowly but steadily. In June, 1886 it was reported that "The Directors of the Social Library have recently added 91 volumes, comprising popular and standard works, making the whole number in the library nearly 1200 volumes. As soon as catalogues can be printed the library will be opened to the public. It is hoped that many will take shares of yearly rights."

Membership fees were not sufficient to completely support the Social Library so a few public spirited citizens made cash donations. "Our venerable and esteemed townsman," Mr. Joseph Warren gave \$500 (a princely sum in those days), the income of which was to be used for the purchase of books. Adams Emerson donated \$75.

Additional funding was raised through a

course of seven popular lectures, and a dramatic entertainment given at the Town Hall in the early spring of 1886. It was announced that "tickets for the course will be sold at low rates as follows: single tickets, 75 cents; gentleman and lady, \$1.25; evening tickets, 25 cents." The course produced a net profit of \$82.

The Social Library continued in existence for 99 years. In 1893 the Town accepted the enabling legislation passed by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and established a free public library. The Social Library turned over its 1846 volumes to the new library.

As a sort of parting gesture, the centennial of the founding of the Social Library was celebrated at a meeting at the Town Hall on Jan. 6, 1894. Mr. Henry S. Perham, the town's historian, delivered an address. Other speakers included Gov. Greenhalge, Thomas Parker Proctor, Esq., Judge Samuel P. Hadley, and Prof. Charles F. Emerson of Dartmouth College.

From this modest beginning have evolved the Adams and MacKay Branch Libraries and the Carriage and Children's Houses we know today.

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