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Libraries and Reading Habits In Early Portland (1763-1836)

One measure of the cultural level of a community is the quality of its libraries. To this end, therefore, the present study examines the libraries of Portland, Maine, in the colonial period and on into the early years of the new nation, stopping with the depression of 1836. In these years, local and national pride was at a high point, and regionalism in the good sense of fostering regional capitals of culture was setting the patterns of American life. Behind the facade of each library, the study will further seek to evaluate actual holdings, where possible, and to discover the borrowing habits of the patrons as clues to the reading habits of the people themselves. For it is on this personal level that literary taste is finally made and disseminated.

As a northern outpost of Massachusetts, its parent state, the Province of Maine had no "public" libraries until Sir William Pepperell established in 1751 a "Revolving Library" in the three parishes of the towns of Kittery and York.¹ Perhaps the popularity of this circulating library encouraged a group of Portland "gentlemen" who as early as 1763 were discussing the possibilities of founding a library on Falmouth Neck, as the town was then called. At any rate, by 1765 a society of twenty-six, including many of the wealthy ship-owners and merchants, had been formed; but the growth of the library was slow. At the end of the first year there were only ninety-three volumes, sixty-two of which comprised a set of "Ancient and modern universal history." Aside from a few religious volumes and the *London Magazine*, the works were in

fact all history. Thus began the second library in Maine, a library that was to continue through several disasters and interruptions to the present day, becoming the Portland Public Library.²

Ten years after its founding, this Falmouth Library was destroyed along with much of the town in the bombardment by Captain Mowat (1775). In 1780 there was talk of reestablishing the library, but all attempts remained mere talk until 1784 when the favored number of twenty-six subscribers was again found. Each gave two dollars in money or books; but in spite of these founders and some additional members in the following years, an inventory in 1786 revealed a valuation of only twenty-five pounds.³ A manuscript record book at the Portland Public Library shows that in this year several new volumes were added, including the poet Thomson's *Works* in two volumes. The next year Thomas B. Wait, a publisher, was reading Belknap's *History of New Hampshire*; and other borrowers were coming from as far as Saco to use the library.⁴ In 1788 Daniel George, schoolmaster and bookseller, started a reading contest with publisher Benjamin Titcomb. George was associated with Titcomb on the *Gazette* and for several years they alternately borrowed the same volumes. For example, in 1789 Titcomb was working through the six volumes of Raynal's *History of the Indies*. As he returned a volume, George would take it out. In this way they read and discussed such books as Robertson's *History of America*, an *Impartial History of the American War*, a history of Ireland, *Elements of General History*, the works of Edward Young, and Gibbon.

Beginning in 1789, each member paid an assessment of six-pence at each quarterly meeting, and the money was turned over to the librarian, Samuel Freeman, Harvard graduate and later judge of Probate Court in Portland (1804-1820).⁵ Freeman was not only the most voluminous reader in the society, for he devoured nearly every volume in the library, but he had also been a key figure in the library movement as early as the 1760's. As the decade of the 1890's opened, the library's 264 volumes were appraised at better than sixty-four

pounds. History was still the staple, with Robertson, Rapin, and Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia* popular; but poets such as Cowley, Prior, and Milton had been added. Politics and economics were represented by Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and the *Journals* of the U. S. Senate and House. The latter were the gift of George Thatcher of Saco, to whom Freeman and George wrote:

We esteem these books as a valuable acquisition; as every *American* ought to be acquainted with the government, and laws of his country.⁶

This sentiment was in keeping with the policy of the society in purchasing as many American books as possible in order to build a library of history, law, and politics for their new country. In this period the growth in holdings was accompanied by a growth in circulation which trebled from 1790 to 1795, when a handsome salary of six dollars a year was voted the new librarian, Daniel Epes.

In 1799 the society was incorporated and seemed firmly established in Portland life; but that life, enjoying a new prosperity, was changing. The proprietors of the library were "clubbable" men and in 1800 voted "that a supper be prepared at the next annual meeting and a cold collation at the quarterly meeting, at the expence [sic] of the society."⁷ Apparently the society dined itself into insolvency, for in 1806 it had to be reestablished, this time with strict by-laws. A drive for new members brought the total of proprietors to fifty men ready to pay the entrance fee of fifteen dollars and the annual dues of two dollars. Among the members were merchants like Woodbury Storer and Ebenezer Preble; lawyers like Stephen Longfellow; booksellers and printers; and the ministers, Samuel Deane and Elijah Kellogg. Books were loaned for two months, with a penalty of five cents a week for overdue books. A catalogue published this year contained 576 volumes. The old sixty-two volume "Ancient universal history" had dwindled to twenty-one volumes, but was still listed. Ever strong on history, the library now had added Josephus and Plutarch to its holdings. In poetry, additions

were Shakespeare, Pope, Goldsmith, Pomfret, "Peter Pindar," and Mandeville. Such eighteenth century classics as Locke, Hume, Paley, and Butler were of course represented. Criticism included Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, Blair's *Lectures*, Lord Kames' *Elements*, Longinus, and Burke's *On the Sublime and the Beautiful*. For journals there were the *London*, the *Literary*, the *British*, and the *Gentleman's* magazines. The dictionary was that of Chambers. Such, in the year before Henry W. Longfellow was born, was the library of Portland, a solid and serious eighteenth century library.

In 1809 a reading room was made available and the society became a library in the full modern sense of the term. By 1811 there were more than sixty proprietors including Prentiss Mellen (father of the poet, Grenville); Joshua Shirley and Isaac Adams, printers; and William B. Sewall, a young "literary lawyer." The collection was broadened this year by the purchase of volumes of travel and biography as well as new works on history. When an inventory was taken on January 1, the honesty of the members was attested by the disappearance of only five books, two of which were subsequently recovered. The missing books were popular ones: Longinus, Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, and a *History of the French Revolution*. Through the war years Judge Freeman held his place as champion reader; in the two years of 1812-1814 he borrowed about 150 books to the fifty each of such consistent readers as Joshua Shirley and William Sewall. Growth of the library continued in spite of the war, or perhaps even because the Embargo gave more time and less money for recreation. Some shares in the library had to be sold several times as merchants broke, but in 1815 there were seventy-four proprietors.⁸

At the time of the entrance of Maine into the union, an organization rivalling the Portland Library was formed under the impetus of the stormy lawyer, politician, and publisher, Albion K. Parris. With annual dues of five dollars, the Portland Atheneum and Reading Room was founded December 17, 1819. Of the original 127 members many were

also members of the library. Stephen Longfellow was a director and William Hyde, publisher, was clerk of the new organization. Originally designed to house only newspapers and periodicals, the Atheneum gradually encroached upon the domain of the library. The reading room was kept open from "sunrise till nine o'clock in the evening," with privileges extended free to members of the legislature, ministers, and visiting shipmasters.⁹ It often acted as lobby (in two senses of the word) for the new Maine legislature, then seated in Portland.

In 1822 the Atheneum was in difficulties, advertising for support of forty additional members,¹⁰ while the library was still flourishing. The latter now had a fine collection of books of travel and had added the *North American Review*, the *Federal*, several volumes of Madame de Staël, and forty-one volumes of Rees's *Cyclopedia*. Novels, romances, and sermons were conspicuously absent. But by the mid-twenties the popularity of the Atheneum threatened to overshadow that of the library. A combination of the two societies was proposed in the *American Patriot* (July 14, 1826) in the following terms:

To meet the demand for information, and to place ourselves upon an equality with other towns of the extent of ours . . . an Atheneum has been projected . . .

It is to consist of a Library, the books of which are to be permitted to go into circulation to the Proprietors, and of a *commercial reading room*: a union, which promises many advantages.

A new group of proprietors comprising the most prominent citizens of the town bought in the shares of the two former organizations, and secured an act of incorporation on March 6, 1827. William Preble became the first president, and William Willis, lawyer-historian, the first secretary and treasurer. The combined holding were about 1500 volumes,¹¹ to which were immediately added the newspapers of New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, several London journals, and Niles' *Register*. The resulting library, in the modest words of Willis, "contained a good selection of books, and was more free from ephemeral and trashy reading, than many larger

libraries . . .”¹² Shortly after the reading room opened in January, 1827, the sum of \$1500 was laid out to make a still better library by the importation of works from France and England.¹³ Continuing to grow, the Atheneum in 1864 numbered 10,646 volumes exclusive of an impressive pamphlet collection. As the Portland Institute and Public Library, it became in 1867 one of the first libraries opened to the public under Maine’s free public library law, the third such law in the nation.

The Portland Library was certainly the oldest and most important in the period before 1836, but other special libraries supplemented it as a source of reading and “social improvement.” The Maine Charitable Mechanics Association, founded in 1815, maintained a library for educational purposes. Always small, this library today has 22,000 volumes, among which are many rare early American books. In 1822, the Maine Historical Society was established, and the foundation of its present invaluable library and manuscript collection of Maine history and genealogy was laid. Still more specialized was the Cumberland Law library, which in 1830 already contained several hundred volumes covering practically all the published laws and digests of use to Portland lawyers.¹⁴ Today as the Cleaves Law Library it is housed in the County Court building on Federal Street and contains the Simon Greenleaf Law Library, amassed by a Portland lawyer in the period 1820-1850.

Additionally a juvenile library was organized by a group of young men on January 3, 1829. Membership in this “Union Social Library” was open to boys between the ages of twelve and twenty-one, upon payment of twelve and one-half cents. The society began with forty books, and with its first four dollars bought *The Last of the Mohicans*, the *Voyages of Columbus*, Goldsmith’s *History of Greece*, a *View of the World*, and *The Unique; or Biographies of Distinguished Characters*. In its second year of existence, the society revised its constitution to set forth the noble aim of the society. The young men wrote:

Considering the vast influence that reading has upon the minds of the young, and believeing [sic] that by uniting ourselves together [sic], in supporting and keeping in operation, a good Library to which we can have access, will advance our intellectual and moral improvement.¹⁵

In 1830 Miss Hopkins' circulating library of "religious and interesting books"¹⁶ came up for sale and was purchased by the boys for \$100, at \$40 down and \$30 a year for two years. To meet this obligation, they solicited the men of the town, particularly the fathers of members. From John Neal the society received no money, but the gift of a set of the *Spectator*, Kotzebue's *Anecdotes*, and Mackenzie's *Man of the World*. The collection assembled from these various sources was one to stir any boy, for it contained a good assortment of books on history, biography, travel, and war. Of poetry they had Milton, Akenside, Young, Moore (*Lalla Rookh*), Byron (*Don Juan*), and Burns. From Miss Hopkins they enthusiastically received such edifying romances as *Thaddeus of Warsaw*, *Abaellino*, *Murder will Out*, the *Coquette*, and *Rachel Dyer* (by Neal). In the early thirties they acquired Shakespeare, Percy's *Anecdotes*, Junius, the *Tatler*, *Mysteries of Udolpho*, and, by Cooper, the *Heidenmauer* and the *Water Witch*.

The Union Social Library flourished up to 1835, when its first trouble struck. The rent for their room, which they leased from a Mrs. Andrews, was raised from ten to twenty dollars a year. Outraged at this inflationary act, the boys rented the library to their treasurer, Augustus Robinson, for twenty-five dollars a year, and moved the books to his quarters. When Robinson in April, 1838, no longer cared to rent, a committee of the society uncovered the fact that nearly 170 titles, most of them two-volume novels had disappeared. Boyish tempers equalled their fathers' in vituperation in a last meeting on June 12, 1838, when it was voted to censure Robinson because he:

has acted a mean and contemptible part — unworthy of a Gentleman, and an honest man. . . he is considered by each and every member of this Society as a Scoundrel.¹⁷

A copy of the resolution was forwarded to Robinson, and after dividing the remaining library among the members, the society disbanded.

So far, except for the embryonic Mechanics Library we have been considering the reading facilities of the "aristocrats" of Portland, made up of the professional and merchant classes. In their lighter moments these aristocrats joined other readers of the town in relaxing over the latest novels and romances. Serving this demand for escape literature were a host of book-stores and rental libraries like that of Miss Hopkins, mentioned above. The predominant stock-in-trade of these establishments was fiction. Fortunately the record book of one such library has survived to give us an accurate picture of popular reading in early Portland. The manuscript record book of Edward Little (now in the Maine Historical Society Library) opens March 12, 1815 and runs through March 11, 1816.

Little drew a respectable clientele, which included among the aristocrats the Rev. Jason Whitman, the politician Charles S. Davies, Nathaniel Deering, Prentiss Mellen, and Mellen's housekeeper-daughter. What these people wanted to borrow from Little was current literature; many of them already had the classics in their homes. The factor of newness, with its attendant snob appeal in being up-to-date, acted much as it does today to create best sellers. Those books which were borrowed more than twenty-five times during the one-year period had in every case been published in London no more than a year before, and in every case but one they were novels. The most popular book of the year was Mary Brunton's three-volume novel, *Discipline*, which Longman had published in London in January, 1815. Scott's *Guy Mannering* was a year older but ran a close second, while Maria Edgeworth's *Patronage* and Robert's *Duty* were nearly as popular. In November, 1815, the *Memoirs of Lady Hamilton* entered the race, and in four months had been borrowed twenty-six times, something of a record in rapid reading and swapping of a book. Wadsworth's *Recluse* [sic] and A. M. Porter's *Recluse of Norway* vied with each other, but both were topped by

Pneumane; or, the Fairy of the Nineteenth Century. Moderately popular books were Scott's *Waverly* and *Lord of the Isles*; Jane Porter's *Thaddeus of Warsaw* and *Scottish Chiefs*; and *Gil Blas*. Miss Porter's books had passed their newness and peak of popularity several years before, but still found readers as they do today. Savage's moral and descriptive poem, *The Wanderer*, was taken out a surprising number of times, as were the travel and war sketches of Sir Robert K. Porter, and J. W. Cunningham's *Velvet Cushion*. This latter, an evangelical account of church parties in England from the time of the Reformation, was extremely popular in both England and America. Portland read, then, in its leisure the current English novels, romances, and narrative poems; preference was given to the most recently imported volumes. The sensational (e.g., the *Memoirs of Lady Hamilton*) could, as now, create a best seller.

The circulating library of Little was only one of many that Portland supported, from the establishment of a small collection by Jenks in 1801 through the large library of Colman & Chisholm in the thirties. In most cases bookselling and lending were combined. During the years 1819-1827, the store of Joseph Johnson was known as the Portland Bookstore and carried a distinguished stock of the classics (e.g., Dryden's *Virgil* and Pope's *Homer*) as well as such books of local interest as John Neal's tragedy, *Otho*, and his long poem, the *Battle of Niagara*.¹⁸ Johnson was finally forced out of business by Daniel C. Poole, who in 1825 opened a cut-rate bookstore with reductions of 50-70% "pro bono publico."¹⁹ Another casualty of Poole's policy was the store of William Hyde, printer and publisher. Besides the stores, auctioneers from time to time handled libraries and collections of imported books. In 1822 a large auction of English books, mainly literary, was held;²⁰ and in 1823 a collection of American works, including books by Irving and Cooper, came on the market.

The testimony of Little's manuscript record concerning the reading habits of Portlanders is borne out by the catalogues of Samuel Colman's so-called Public Library of the 1830's. His first catalogue in 1831 listed about 1,000 titles, 500 of

which were novels and romances. History and travel accounted for 324; religious books, 135; and plays and poetry, only 58. Colman also maintained a small juvenile library of about 80 volumes. In 1834 Colman had affiliated himself with Lilly, Wait and Company of Boston and carried over 1,400 titles. He advertised that he had all the works of Opie and five by Portland's John Neal. In 1837 he took as partner Alexander F. Chisholm, and together they had well over 2,000 volumes, including twelve titles by Marryat, fourteen by Cooper, fourteen by Bulwer, and twenty-three Waverley novels by Scott.

It seems evident that the literate Portlander had at his disposal the serious historical and political library of the Athenaeum and the recreative libraries of the booksellers, a combination which made available most of the literature of his day. Furthermore, many of the homes had private libraries of reasonable breadth and size. In her *Autobiography*, Elizabeth Oakes Smith recalls such a library in her grandparents' farm at Cape Elizabeth, just outside Portland. Belonging to the older generation, her grandparents:

did not make a practice of reading the newspapers and novels; nothing but the Bible and such works as Doddridge's "Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul," Baxter's "Saint's Rest," and other works of the kind, which interested even me partly from the thoughts and partly from the rhythm of good prose.²¹

This seems like a deadly library when judged by the standards of today, but there were other books available to the precocious Elizabeth when she went to live with the old folks:

I remember there was a collection of old books on a high shelf at the farm house . . . I was perched upon a stool in mid-air, devouring "Tom Jones" at nine years of age. When my grandmother found me thus occupied, she exclaimed, "Elizabeth, that book is not good reading for a little girl," and took it from my hand. . . . I went to the bookshelf and read again and again . . .²¹

In this semi-surreptitious way the child read through Fielding, Richardson, Fox's *Martyrs* (gloating over the idea of

martyrdom), Milton, and *Don Quixote*; but rejected Addison. Shakespeare she did not discover until fifteen, but after her early marriage to Seba Smith she commenced a practice of reading Shakespeare aloud to her husband.²²

Further testimony on the quality of these private libraries is given by Samuel Longfellow in his *Life* of his brother.²³ In the Longfellow home could be found:

Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Dryden, Thomson, Goldsmith; the Spectator, the Rambler, the Lives of the Poets, Rasselas, Plutarch's Lives; Hume's, Gibbon's, Gillies's and Robertson's Histories, and the like. . . . Cowper's poetry the boy was fond of; and Moore's Lalla Rookh. Robinson Crusoe, of course, and the Arabian Nights were read by the children together; and Henry took delight in Don Quixote, and Ossian

This was no provincial family library, but the solid accumulation of Stephen and Zilpah Longfellow. The practice of reading aloud in the family circle, referred to by both Mrs. Smith and by Longfellow, was widespread, and many learned almost by heart whole works of literature read in this pleasant way.

The remarkable private library of William Willis, lawyer, historian, a founder of the Maine Historical Society, and the first president of the Portland Public Library, is in a class by itself, but does illustrate the level of culture of the outstanding men of the community, the men by which any community must be judged. In 1834 Willis had printed for his library a catalogue which ran to forty-seven pages.²⁴ There were more than 1,400 volumes, excluding his wide collection of periodicals; his bound newspapers from as far away as Boston and New York, and dating back to the 1760's; and his collection of early American pamphlets, which is now a prized possession of the Portland Public Library. As a lawyer he had a law collection of several hundred volumes; as a scholar he had dictionaries and grammars of Latin, Greek, French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Arabic, Persian, and Micmac, as well as the English dictionaries of Johnson, Walker, and Webster; as an historian, his collection of history ran to more

than two hundred volumes. Books of travel were accompanied by atlases and gazetteers. There were twenty titles under agriculture, thirty under science, and twenty under medicine. In literature the collection was equally impressive, ranging from the classics of Rome and Greece, through English poetry and drama, to sets of novels (Charles Brockden Brown, Miss Edgeworth, Scott, Fielding). Willis's holding of English poetry started with Gower and Chaucer and came down to Longfellow, whose *Voices of the Night*, when it appeared in 1839, was added in pencil to the catalogue. In literature Willis also collected continental works in the original, especially Rousseau, St. Pierre, and Goethe.

Even the above full summary does not do justice to the impressive library of this citizen of Portland: his interests seem as inclusive as those of a Renaissance gentleman. And such William Willis was, a man of affairs who dabbled in the arts and concerned himself as a good patrician in the reform and benevolent movements of the day. His library is outstanding but typical. A full range of reading was available in Portland, but it was available to the few. Cost and exclusiveness kept general reading in the hands of the minority. Free public libraries on a democratic basis were still some thirty years off; but Portland had a good foundation early laid, nor was the city late in making her books accessible to all. What is more, Portland's children grew up in an atmosphere of books so pervasive that the usual criticism levelled at the most famous of these children, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, is the charge of excessive bookishness.

We conclude that in the period before 1836 Portland cared enough for cultural values to expend time and funds to maintain a fine Atheneum, a number of lending libraries, and a juvenile library, as well as societies of research such as the Maine Historical Society. As far as can be determined, Portland taste demanded the serious eighteenth century reading of history, biography, and travel, properly lightened by conservative poetry and moralistic romances. The theory of literature and the arts was drawn from Lord Kames, Burke,

and Blair; Coleridge and the Wordsworth of the *Lyrical Ballads* were unknown. We find no mention of such dangerous writers as Hunt or Shelley, and Byron is represented only by *Don Juan*, possibly admitted because of a neo-classical prejudice in favor of satire. We detect a strong Anti-Jacobin sentiment in the absence of "radical" writers from the list of popular reading, and recall that it was the Maine novelist, Sally Wood, who had in 1800 exposed the atheism and "lack of principles" of the Illuminati in *Julia and the Illuminated Baron*. Literature was supposed to please and to instruct, that is instruct in good moral principles, and had to do so in the leisure hours of men concerned with the "real" world of commerce, the law, and the church. The literature that naturally grew from this soil was the juvenile literature of J. S. C. Abbott and Elijah Kellogg, Jr., and the home-and-hearth poetry of Henry W. Longfellow.

— NOTES —

¹ "Maine's Library Background," *Bulletin of the Maine Library Association*, April, 1941, p. 4. But see Ava H. Chadbourne, "Early Social Libraries in Maine," *Bulletin of the Maine Library Association*, February 1970, pp. 3-17.

² See William Willis, *History of Portland*, rev. ed., Portland, 1865, pp. 380f. Slightly different dates are given by William Freeman in his "Samuel Freeman — His Life and Service, by his Grandson," *Collections and Proceedings of the Maine Historical Society*, 2nd ser., V, 11 (May 24, 1893).

³ Willis, pp. 744f.

⁴ For example, George Thatcher, whose gift to the library is mentioned below.

⁵ Willis, p. 745. Samuel Freeman was "Library Keeper" as early as 1785 when he advertised for the return of missing volumes (*Falmouth Gazette*, December 14 and 31, 1785).

⁶ Manuscript letter at the Portland Public Library.

⁷ Quoted by Willis, p. 747.

⁸ Facts in this paragraph are from a manuscript volume at the Portland Public Library.

⁹ *Regulations and By-Laws of the Portland Atheneum and Reading Room* . . . Portland, printed at the *Argus* office . . . 1820, pp. 7f.

¹⁰ *Independent Statesman*, December 12, 1822.

¹¹ The printed catalogue of 1826 makes the following subject breakdown of the collection (numbers refer to estimated number of titles):

Antiquities, manners and customs, and geography	46
Biography	83
History, Civil	125
History, Ecclesiastical	35
Journals and magazines	22
Miscellaneous (poetry, criticism, essays)	140
Philosophy, science and the arts	50
Politics and statistics	70
Theology and Christian morals	70
Novels, romances and fictitious history	38
Voyages and travels	110

Since many of the titles in history and travel run to twenty-four or more volumes, the total number of volumes in the Atheneum comes close to the figure of 1500 given in the text above.

¹² Willis, p. 748.

¹³ Willis, p. 749.

¹⁴ Besides the Massachusetts and Maine laws and digests, there were those for New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut; the English Statutes; Coke; Blackstone; Cunningham; Chitty; etc.

¹⁵ This and all information about the society is from two manuscript books at the Portland Public Library.

¹⁶ Miss Hopkins opened in 1818 with 800 volumes, so advertised in the *Argus*, February 10, 1818.

¹⁷ See note 15.

¹⁸ *Argus*, January 4, 1820.

¹⁹ *Argus*, January 10, 1825 *et seq.*

²⁰ A complete list may be read in the *Independent Statesman*, December 12, 1822.

²¹ Mary Alice Wyman, ed., *Selections from the Autobiography of Elizabeth Oakes Smith*, Lewiston, Me., 1924, p. 32.

²² *Autobiography*, p. 56.

²³ *Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, 2 vols., Boston, 1886, I, 11.

²⁴ *Catalogue of Books in William Willis' Library*, Portland, 1834.

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