Libraries of Colonial America: Fostering Democracy and Creating Cultural Identity

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Abstract

Libraries in Colonial America were influential in the establishment of democracy and the lead up to the American revolution. This argument is supported by examining the book, library, and information culture of 18th century England and how its influence and how it compares to the landscape in Colonial America. Additionally, the argument is evidenced by an in-depth look at the library and book culture from the earliest colonial establishments to the late 18th century, including private libraries throughout the colonies, the differences between northern and southern colonial libraries, and, most importantly, the development of the subscription library in Benjamin Franklin's the Library Company of Philadelphia. Finally, by looking at other colonial libraries under British rule, conclusions are drawn on the unique circumstances American libraries developed under that allowed for the growth of democratic ideas in colonial libraries.

Keywords: Colonial America, libraries, Benjamin Franklin, British Empire, library history, democracy

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Books and learning were always a large part of culture in Colonial America. From the passage of the Mayflower across the Atlantic Ocean, even small collections of private libraries and personal Bibles traveled along with the people, helping to curate these settlers' culture from these first days in the New World. As time progressed in the colonies, libraries in 18th century Colonial America developed outside of intense British influence, unlike libraries in other British colonies, which helped establish American cultural identities separate from England and encouraged the fostering of ideas of democracy, particularly in colonies with well-established libraries.

To support this thesis, I will explore three research questions through the course of this paper. The first question is: What were libraries like in Colonial America, and what influence did British rule have on them? Harris (1999) said "the United States has been fortunate throughout its history in having a sizeable number of citizens who collected and preserved books, and doubly fortunate that many of those book collections have ended up in publicly available libraries" (p. 170). This indicates a shared value from the formation of the colonies in books and learnings, evident in the large number of private libraries and the travel of books with colonists to the New World, but also a value in sharing books and knowledge with each other. Harris also noted "literacy was steadily advancing throughout the colonies during the 17th and 18th centuries...84 percent between 1758 and 1862; and nearly 90 percent in the period 1787-1795" (p. 167). Further exploration of these ideas and more will help make sense of the library landscape in Colonial America, as well as what influences transferred from Britain through ruling powers and trans-Atlantic trade.

The second question I will discuss is: Did libraries have an influence on the development of democracy and/or ideas of revolution in Colonial America, and if so, how? It cannot be denied that many of the founding fathers gathered in and used libraries leading up to the American Revolution. Benjamin Franklin was the most notorious as a founder of the Library Company of Philadelphia, one of the most influential libraries in American history at least, but as Sable (1987) said:

> A total of eleven members of the Library Company served as delegates to the Continental Congress which met in Carpenters Hall, then the very home of the Library Company of Philadelphia, beginning in September of 1774. Ten Library Company members signed the Declaration of Independence and in 1777 Carpenters Hall was converted into a hospital for wounded (revolutionaries). (p. 33)

Not only were founding fathers members of the subscription library, but the first meetings of American democratic government were held within the library, and it was used to tend to revolutionaries fighting for independence and democracy during the Revolutionary War.

Finally, the third question I will address is: How were libraries in Colonial America different from libraries in other British colonies? By exploring British colonies in Canada, Oceania, and South Africa, some similarities and differences will begin to show. In brief, England's imperial weight gets heavier and more complex throughout the 19th century, and this is reflected in the conduct of libraries within their colonies. Particularly in South Africa and Australia, there is evidence of suppression of native and local voices in favor of British-imported texts that contributes to the suppression of native culture and a distinguishing identity separate from the mother country (Wade & Fermanis, 2023).

Library and Book Culture in 18th Century England

In order to examine English influence on Colonial American libraries, we must first examine the culture surrounding books, libraries, and the spread of information in England at the time. With the invention and widening access of the printing press, cheaper materials resulted in a steady, healthy supply of books and other reading materials after 1500. “The power of the printed word increased a hundredfold the power of the written word, and never again were Europe and the western world to suffer from a lack of graphic communication for the conveyance of facts and ideas” (Harris, 1999, p. 131). With this came news-sheets, gossip columns and a variety of community-centered writings that cultivated the spread of information.

Moving forward in time to the 17th and 18th centuries, the culture of this time was heavily influenced by oral tradition and the practice of gathering to share ideas and knowledge in a social setting. Howard (2012) said “the London coffee house acted as a place for the sharing and discussion of information, which linked to a preoccupation of the period with the idea of public reputation and image” (p. 173). Howard’s article goes into great detail on a popular London news-sheet, the *Grub-Street Journal*, that had a heavy, calculated hand in influencing English culture. “Between 1730 and 1733, the *Grub-Street Journal* was one of the most renowned and controversial weekly news-sheets produced and sold in London, with its rival *Weekly Register* calling it ‘universally condemn’d, and yet universally read’” (Howard, 2012, p. 172). In addition to news (both domestic and foreign), and advertisements, these papers also contained a section on literary content, commenting on good and bad books and connecting them to morality (Howard, 2012, p. 174).

These news-sheets worked together with the London coffee houses to spread their word and foster the social nature of information sharing. Howard (2012) noted:

> The links between coffee houses and the publication trade were extremely close, with houses attracting customers by stocking the latest journal, and acting as books sellers. The coffee house acted as a place for moral and political debate, and could be considered as the place to be seen in 1730s London (p. 180).

As will be later discussed, these practices were brought to Colonial America and helped cultivate the rise of subscription libraries, which would then be later brought to England and the rest of Europe.

Another important piece to the book and library culture of 18th century England is the circulating library. A prime example of this type of library is the one run by Thomas Lowndes in London. Jacobs (2003) said "Lowndes ran one of the earliest, largest, and most successful circulating libraries in Britain, operating continuously from 1751 until the early 1780s" (p. 2). These libraries had brief lives but were nonetheless very influential and indicative of the culture. Lowndes's library listed over 6,000 titles, containing only about 600 fiction titles and the rest being nonfiction, which is typical of other circulating libraries in the area at that time (p. 2).

On the other hand, provincial circulating libraries contained a different variety of titles, illustrating the differences between London city life and provincial countryside life. For this example, Jacobs looked to the circulating library of Michael Heavisides. Running for about thirty years between the 1780s and 1820s, Heavisides library was much smaller, containing 466 titles in 1790, with 90 percent of the titles being fiction. Jacobs said:

> Heavisides typifies the provincial librarians who during the last two decades of the century operated small shops devoted heavily to fiction, and who, if they printed or

> ‘published’ books at all, did so for a local market rather than for the ‘national’ market achieved by major London librarian-publishers like Lowndes. (p. 3)

Heavisides books were much more focused on entertainment than advancement and learning as indicated by Lowndes library catalogs. While fiction did become more popular in London in the 1790s and into the 19th century, these distinctions are important to note as they display a cultural difference even within the small country.

The 18th century also saw the conception of the national British Library. An amalgamation of donated private libraries from various aristocracy, “the achievement of a truly national library for Britain came in the 1750s” (Harris, 1999, p. 134). In 1757, King George added his private library in establishing the British Museum. While there was not much growth at this time, university libraries such as Oxford and Cambridge were well established if not flourishing, and by the mid-1800s, the beginnings of modern public libraries would start to form.

Libraries in Colonial America and the Rise of Democratic Ideals

As briefly touched on previously, books have always had a place and an importance since the arrival of Europeans to North America. Kraus (1974) said “even in the crowded quarters of the Mayflower, William Brewster brought the nucleus of the 400-volume library that (has been called) the most important early private library in New England” (p. 31). Kraus goes on to note that wills from the Plymouth Colony indicate that “all but a dozen of the seventy inventories...included books” and “there were at least a thousand private libraries in seventeenth century Virginia with an average of twenty volumes or more” (p. 33).

In these early libraries, the Bible was the most important work and, if other books were in the collection, its accompanying titles were largely biblical in nature such as books on practical

divinity and commentaries on scripture. As many of the early settlers were seeking religious freedom and fleeing from persecution, the nature of these libraries aligns. Additionally, “nearly 45 percent of the books printed in English prior to 1640 were religious books” (Kraus, p. 34), which also plays a hand into the heavily religious collections. Beyond religious texts, the first settlers were also concerned with practical matters of surviving in the New World, and their collections reflected this. Religious texts were followed by philosophy and law, and science and practical arts as the next largest holdings.

As the colonies developed into the 18th century, some cultural differences began to emerge between the Northern and Southern colonies. In the South, “these libraries reflect the traditional culture of the southern gentleman, that of a transplanted loyal British subject” (Keys, 1938, p. 374). While private libraries were prevalent throughout the colonies and influenced the development of other types of libraries, private libraries were more common in the South, particularly in colonial Virginia. In the early days, libraries were similar across the board as they contained mostly religious texts and many were owned by clergymen. As time progressed, royalists in the South had greater access and resources and imported new books from the motherland. Keys also says:

> Another supply of books for the Virgina libraries was obtained from the sons of the southern gentry. Many of these young men were sent to the Continent for higher education. When they returned they brought their reading matter with them. (p. 383)

Similarly to English culture, Virginian libraries also displayed “a lively interest in periodicals” with many of them coming from England itself (Smart, 1938, pp. 36-37).

In contrast, the settlers of North Carolina “were refugees from other colonies” and they had “little time for books and reading” (Keys, 1938, p. 385). However, there were some important private libraries in the colony, and they were of a similar nature to those found in colonial Virginia and the homes of southern gentry. The library culture of the southern colonies was largely influenced by English practices that they brought with them, “a transplanted British culture” (Keys, 1938, p. 386). This favoring of the British way and the access to books and reading being absorbed largely by the elite indicates little communal sharing of ideas and less grounds for democratic ideals to cultivate.

However, Smart (1938) found through examining the titles and drawing conclusions on the reading habits of colonial Virginians that the libraries “indicate the cosmopolitan point of view of the colonists; and the number of works on monarchy, empire, and important historical figures indicates a wide interest in the relationship between government and the forces of history” (p. 40). As will be later explored, it is not as outwardly obvious that southern libraries contributed to the rise of democratic ideals in the colonies as displayed in the north, but there is evidence of interest in government and politics that could evolve into questioning royalist authority. If nothing else, “Colonial Virginia leaders played a vitally important role in the development of American culture before, during, and after the Revolution” (Smart, 1938, p. 24), and a culture developing beyond the culture of the ruling country in an important step towards independence.

Moving northward, “the library contents reveal the growth of a genuine democratic spirit” (Keys, 1938, p. 373). Private libraries of Puritan leaders were common in the 17th and 18th centuries, and while very religious in nature, libraries such as Puritan leader Cotton Mather’s also exhibited tolerance for other religions (Keys, p. 375). New England in the 17th

century also saw professional men develop small collections, as well as “many merchants, farmers, skilled craftsmen, and even fisherman” (Harris, 1999, p. 165). The large private library of Connecticut’s governor John Winthrop, Jr. eventually was given to the New York Society library with books “on subjects as varied as religion, history, travel, philosophy, law, and literature” (Harris, p. 166).

Undoubtedly, the most important library development for Colonial America came in the 18th century with the creation and establishment of subscription libraries. It begins with Benjamin Franklin and the Junto, a social club organized by Franklin and his friends that would meet up weekly at taverns in Philadelphia to read aloud with each other, discuss thoughts and ideas, and share information. “Franklin brought back to Philadelphia the idea, current in England, of founding a social group which would meet periodically for the purpose of intellectual (and practical-topic) discussions” (Sable, 1987, p. 30). This method was popular among the middle class as the cost of printed materials could be a burden, and without time to read during the day due to work, the added cost of candles to see by encouraged the gathering in social places and the sharing of resources.

Eventually, the Junto joined together to create a shared library, which only lasted for a brief time, but the idea evolved into the Library Company of Philadelphia, the first subscription library, established in 1731. Also called social libraries, the subscription library “is jointly owned by shareholders...and maintained by the payment of annual subscriptions” (Jones, 2021, p. 110). While exclusive to those who could afford it, the subscription library is a huge step towards the modern public library and was pivotal in developing a shared culture and spread of information and ideas leading up to the American Revolution. Franklin “wrote that the Library Company of Philadelphia and others it inspired ‘have improved the general Conversation of the Americans,

made the common Tradesman and Farmers as intelligent as most Gentlemen from other Countries, and perhaps have contributed in some degree to the Stand so generally made throughout the Colonies in Defense of their Privileges'" (Boudreau, 1996, pp. 305-306). This "stand" and "defense" is of course alluding to the rights and freedoms desired that would lead to the American Revolution and the establishment of a democratic state.

Similarities can be seen among the Library Company founders that demonstrate their interest in civics and government. "They were involved in a variety of civic and governmental activities. Library founders held offices in ethnic and religious organizations, took active parts in later philanthropic works, and were elected to numerous offices" (Boudreau, 1996, p. 307). As discussed previously, many of the members of the first Continental Congress were founding members of the Library Company, 10 signed the Declaration of Independence, and the Library was used as a site for many important events in the establishment of democracy in America. Beyond the people, the books chosen for the collection "advocated the rights of the people as well as considering the potential abuses that could come from an unjust government" (Boudreau, 1996, p. 316). The community-based sharing of ideas that the Library was founded upon did not disappear, and with these books in the collection, spirited conversation took place around the ideas of democracy and unjust government institutions.

Soon after the establishment of the Library Company, subscription libraries began to sprout throughout the colonies. Jones (2021) said:

> At least fifty-one social libraries were established (in New England) between 1733 and 1780...the libraries were considered to be 'public' in the eighteenth century sense of the word, distinct from 'private' libraries that individuals might keep at their respective homes. (p. 112).

Other important libraries of the time modeled after the Library Company include the New York Society Library (NYSL), the Quaker Byberry Library Company and Library Company of Burlington, as well as subscription libraries in Charleston and Baltimore. Jones (2021) notes “the charters and records of early American social libraries reveal a shared ambition: the advancement of ‘useful’ and ‘improving’ knowledge” (p. 110). These libraries also carried on the oral traditions and shared experience, encouraging spirited, good-natured debate, and expanding ideas in the process.

British Colonial Libraries Beyond Colonial America

As the British Empire expanded into the 19th century, libraries began to establish in the colonies. In 19th century British Columbia, colonial rulers looked to libraries to establish morality and virtues in their colonists. Dean (2011) said:

> Many miners who wintered in Victoria (British Columbia) passed their hours in barrooms and with prostitutes, thus constituting what Victoria’s elite deemed an unruly and immoral assembly. Victoria’s leadership hoped libraries and literary activities would not only attract miners to live in Victoria but also contain and shape working-class men into reliable and productive colonial subjects. (pp. 56-57)

This passage demonstrates a much tighter hold British leaders attempted to have over colonists in British Columbia. The leaders used the libraries as a means of control and a way to mold the colonists into their idea of an ideal citizenry, a much different outcome to that which occurred in Colonial America.

Similarly in the Australian colony in the 19th century, libraries were much more indicative of a domineering British culture than the establishment of unique customs by colonists

and indigenous people. The idea of subscription libraries transported to England from the American colonies, and from England to the Australian colony. Patton (2021) remarks:

> The Australian Subscription Library followed the pattern of these early subscription libraries...(as)...it is likely that members of early colonial society in Sydney had been members of, or had lived in towns with, established subscription libraries back in the United Kingdom. (p. 196)

Additionally, ordinary citizens were unlikely able to afford membership, so members were mostly elites in the society content with or a part of British rule.

Taking South Africa into consideration alongside Australia, British rule created a cultural hegemony within its colonies and dictated what types of books circulated in the publishing industries of colonies in the Southern Hemisphere. Wade and Fermanis (2023) said "local book publishing in the colonies was limited, 'derivative,' and 'chronically belated'" and "London was the publishing capital of the empire, with colonial readers mainly reading British books" (p. 73). The market pushed British thoughts and ideas and limited already small amounts of native thought from reaching the market.

That is not to say that there were no native voices represented, however. Wade and Fermanis (2023) noted "early colonial libraries did attempt to collect what limited local or regionally-specific interest fiction was available...These libraries therefore gradually developed a policy of nascent nation-building alongside the acquisition of popular literature from Britain" (p. 102). While at a slow rate, there were some notions of cultural independence developing in these British colonies throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Overall, though, these influences combined created an information atmosphere much different than that in the American colonies

and contributed to the stifling of unique culture separate from the ruling country that slowed the emergence of independence.

Conclusion

Colonial America is a unique case study in library development under colonial rule fostering cultural independence and encouraging democratic thoughts and ideals. It would be insincere to exclude the fact that it was only well-off white men that benefited from the system for decades, if not centuries. Women are barely acknowledged, let alone represented, in American libraries until the 19th century. According to McMullen (1978) few women's libraries were established in the 1790s, with a few more popping up between 1800 and 1830, but it was not until after 1830 that women were granted real access to books and libraries in a way comparable to men.

As for Black Americans, access has been an issue throughout American history with affects still being felt today. Throughout the Jim Crow era, library access was intentionally denied to Black Americans, and libraries even intentionally perpetuated racist ideology to their patrons and in their collections (Selby, 2019, p. 4). This barring of access was intentionally malicious and an effort to stifle expression and organization; "Policy makers in the Jim Crow era believed that barring African Americans from libraries would strip them of an essential organizing tool: shared educational resources" (Summers, n.d., para. 9).

Keeping this in mind and without diminishing the experience of huge portions of the population, it is still evident that not only were libraries in Colonial America important to the establishment of democracy, but they were central to the revolutionary movement. Unlike other British colonies, the American colonies were able to develop their own culture in such a strong

way that they even ended up influencing British culture such as with the establishment of subscription libraries. As Jones (2021) said “it is important to stress that they were an American, rather than English, innovation” (p. 110), and the subscription libraries “concentrated on works which would allow them to understand the way in which their political and physical universes operated” (Boudreau, 1996, p. 316).

In general, the importance and regard American colonists had for books and learning from the beginning helped foster independent thinking. As time progressed, cultural identity began to separate from England and was furthered by revolutionary institutions such as the Library Company of Philadelphia. The Library Company was so entangled in the fostering of democratic ideals and the Revolution itself, from being a birthplace for expanding thoughts and ideas to serving as a physical place for first government actions of the United States of America. “In a letter to the Library Company, the members of the Constitutional Convention stated their thanks for the sue of the Library’s books, and in truth the Library Company of Philadelphia subsequently served as the nation’s first Library of Congress” (Sable, 1987, p. 34). Without the American cultural value of books and information, and without the Library Company of Philadelphia, the establishment of democratic ideals and the fostering of American independence may not have occurred for many more years, if at all.

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