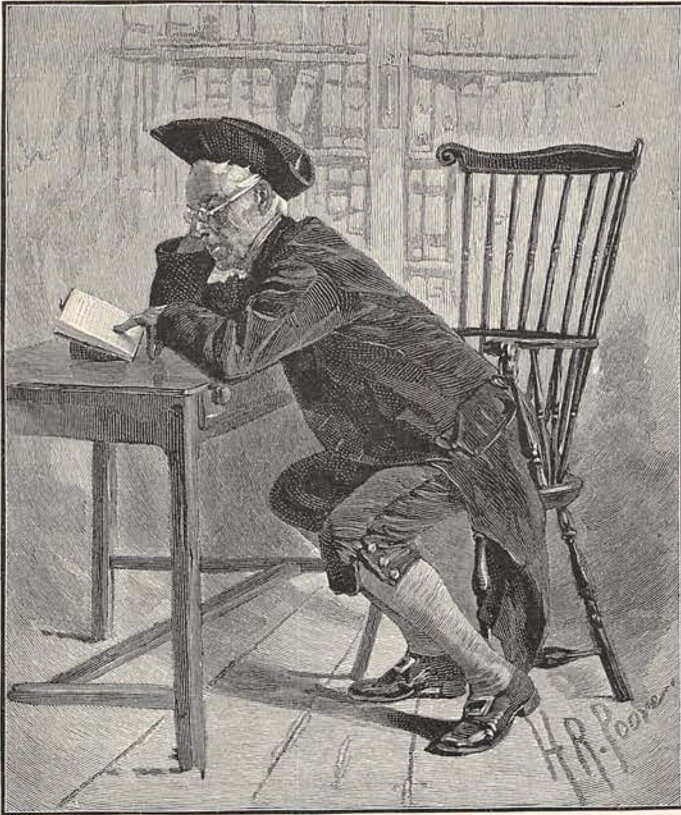
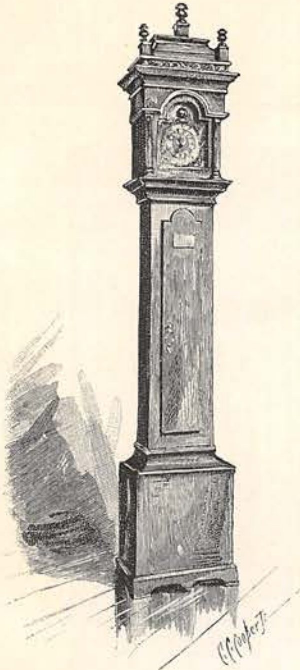
THE FATHER OF AMERICAN LIBRARIES.



A BOOK-WORM.

IT was in the year 1731, the fourth of King George the Second's reign, that the Philadelphia, the oldest American library, and, so far as is known, the first of all lending libraries, took its beginning. Fifty young men, artisans and gentlemen of that town, joined themselves into a literary association, and subscribed a hundred pounds for the purchase of books, agreeing also to pay each ten shillings annually during fifty years for the same purpose. It has lasted through changes of government and fashion, and possesses an interest beyond its mere local importance, from the historic associations which gather around it. Polished granite and enameled brick might tower around, but its dark old red brick front maintained an unshaken dignity as did Franklin's statue—"with a gown for his dress, and a Roman head," as the Doctor, when asked his wishes, quaintly expressed them. Banks might chink their money; courts, post-office, and custom-house disgorge their bustling crowds next door,—but as you passed through its vestibule, embellished with old leathern fire-buckets, and the door swung noiselessly behind you, all became quiet. You might have been miles from the life outside, for any information coming through your ears. A repose fell on you insensibly. Old pictures looked down on you, and soberly bound books. The wired cases, and the old green tables in the alcoves, seemed to have been there always. Its habitués all knew one another, as well as all about one another's great-great-grandfathers. They laughed decorously over old jokes;—a new joke would have seemed hardly in order. Everything breathed quiet and long-continued good understanding. The epithet "old" came naturally to one's lips. "That good old library," Thackeray calls it, writing to Mr. William B. Reed.

The little fiction of the English law, that the king can never die, might almost be applied in the same sense to many members



BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S CLOCK IN THE PHILADELPHIA LIBRARY.

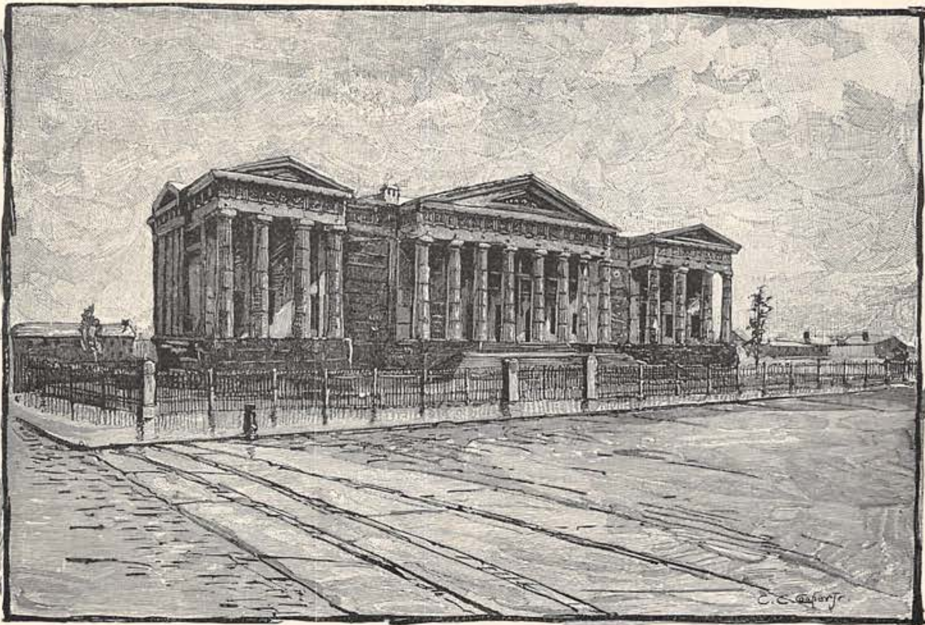
of the library whose shares, like the English throne, have never been vacant, one of the family always inheriting it. Out of a bead-roll as long as that of Homer's ships a few instances may be given of this curious persistency of shares in families. Colonel William Bradford became a shareholder in 1769. His son, William Bradford, Attorney-General of the United States under Washington, next held the share, which is still in the family. Dr. Thomas Cadwalader, lieutenant-governor of the province, and father of the two Revolutionary officers, General John and Colonel Lambert Cadwalader, was one of the original directors in 1731, and his descendants are still shareholders. Governor Thomas McKean, one of the signers of the Declaration, acquired in 1777 a share, which his family still holds.

In fact, it might have been thought that as it had existed, so it would always exist. With its ease, its long existence, and connection with men whose names belong to the history of their age, it had become a sort of conservative social influence. It was unagitated by questions of cataloguing, undisturbed by debates whether a library should be merely a reservoir, or should also assume the function of a filter. In brief, its periods of existence were unmarked by any of those interrogations with which, nowadays, we see fit to punctuate every experience of life. Nevertheless, the Library Company underwent, as shall presently be told, an entire change of scene. The old building has been abandoned to the Philistines and now flaunts a large gilded sign—a sign of the times—on its astonished front. And a void exists in the breasts of many ancient Philadelphians, unsatisfied by the knowledge that the cultured Bostonian or the scornful New Yorker, as he emerges from the railroad station on Broad street, is confronted by the finest building wholly devoted to library uses in America, and one which has few, if any, equals in Europe.

The library was well sponsored, being Frank-

THE OLD LIBRARY, FIFTH AND LIBRARY STREETS, PHILADELPHIA.

lin's "first project of a public nature." John Dickinson, Godfrey the mathematician, Benjamin Rush, Charles Thomson, Secretary of Congress, and Franklin himself,—who was also at one time librarian,—were among its early directors, and it was cradled in buildings whose names now form part of our fund of national recollections. Franklin says:



THE RIDGWAY BRANCH OF THE PHILADELPHIA LIBRARY.

"At the time I established myself in Philadelphia there was not a good bookstore in any of the colonies southward of Boston. In New York and Philadelphia, the printers were indeed stationers; they sold only paper, etc., almanacs, ballads, and a few common school-books. Those who loved reading were obliged to send for their books from England; the members of the Junto (his club) had each a few. We had hired a room to hold our club in. I proposed that we should each of us bring our books to that room, where they would not only be ready to consult in our conferences, but become a common benefit, each of us being at liberty to borrow such as he wished to read at home. * * * This was accordingly done, and for some time contented us. * * * Yet some inconveniences occurring, each took his books home again. And now I set on foot my first project of a public nature, that for a subscription library. The institution soon manifested its ability, was imitated in other towns and in other provinces. * * * Reading became fashionable, and our people having no amusements to divert their attention from study, became better acquainted with books, and in a few years were observed by strangers to be better instructed and more intelligent than people of the same rank in other countries."

That the leaven did indeed work as Franklin said we may infer from the fact that in a few years Philadelphia took a decided lead in the art of printing, in amount as well as execution, and that it had a larger number of newspapers. From direct testimony, including that of the Rev. Jacob Duche, who, though of foreign extraction, became himself a director of the Library, and afterward made himself notorious by an attempt to persuade Washington to forsake the American cause, we would infer that the character of the society was decidedly literary. He writes, in 1774:

"There is less distinction among the citizens of Philadelphia than among those of any other city in the world. * * * Literary accomplishments here meet with deserved applause. But such is the taste for books, that almost every man is a reader."

The Company, in its first choice of reading matter, took the advice of James Logan, the confidential friend of Penn, "esteeming him to be a gentleman of universal learning and the best judge of books in these parts." It is noticeable that, in their list of about fifty authors, the only ones which may be said to belong to light literature are the "Guardian," "Tatler," "Spectator," and Addison's works. The books were imported from England, and with them came the first gift to the Library. Peter Collinson, a London mercer, wrote:

"Gentlemen, I am a stranger to most of you, but not to your laudable intention to erect a public library.

RELICS OF THE OLD LIBRARY.

I beg your acceptance of my mite, 'Sir Isaac Newton's Philosophy' and 'Philip Miller's Gardener's Dictionary.' It will be an instance of your candour to accept the intention and good-will of the giver and not regard the meanness of the gift."

The books were at first kept in the house of Robert Grace, whom Franklin characterizes as "a young gentleman of some fortune, generous, lively, and witty, a lover of punning and of his friends." Afterward they were allotted a room in the State-House; and, in 1742, a charter was obtained from the Proprietaries. In 1790, having in the interval absorbed several other associations and sustained a removal to Carpenter's Hall, where its apartment had been used as a hospital for wounded American soldiers, the Library was at last housed in a building especially erected for it at Fifth and Chestnut streets, where it remained until within the last few years.

It brought only about eight thousand volumes into its new quarters, for it had languished somewhat during the Revolution and the war of words which attended our political birth. But it had received no injury. Two meetings had been called to consider measures of removal to a safe place, but whether its members were engaged in taking care of their country or of themselves, they did not attend the meetings, and the red-coats marching in on the little visit they paid us after Germantown, found the books, and read them, too. But the red-coats behaved, in this instance, at least, peaceably, paying loyally for their use and not damaging nor confiscating nor carrying away a single volume.

Many relics of the Revolutionary time are stored in the Library, among them a colossal bust of Minerva, which stood behind the chair of the Speaker of the first Congress that met in Philadelphia. The writer of this paper is at Logan's library-table, sitting in a chair used by Washington, while Dickinson's writing-desk holds some books on the right, West's portrait of Franklin looks from overhead, and a lock of Washington's hair hangs near his left hand. Penn's and Cromwell's clocks, too, keep remembrance of other times, and go on ticking, as if reckless of a balance. Besides memories, however, the library gathered little during those sad days of the Revolution. But when the scene changed, and the weeping women who tended the wounded in churches and on door-steps after the defeat at Germantown were replaced by the triumphing cavalry who rode through the shouting streets to the State-House to lay at the feet of Congress the captured standards of Cornwallis, our Company felt the reaction, and in a little while sent an order to London for books—its first importation in nine years.

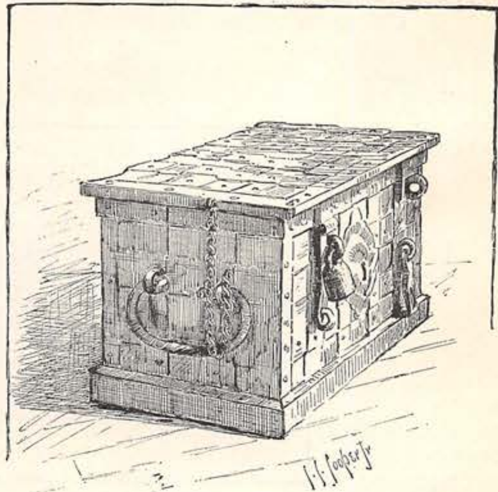
Two years after removal to its quarters on Fifth street, the Library received the most valuable gift of books it has as yet had. James Logan, friend and adviser of Penn and of the celebrated Colonial Governor, Thomas Lloyd, President of Council, and holding other high trusts in the Province,

JOHN DICKINSON'S DESK.

THE PRESENT BUILDING.

had gathered a most important collection of books. Mr. Logan was translator of Cicero's "Cato Major," the first classic published in America, beside being versed in natural science. His library comprised, as he tells us, "over one hundred volumes of authors, all in Greek, with mostly their versions; all the Roman classics without exception; all the Greek mathematicians. * * * Besides there are many of the most valuable Latin authors, and a great number of modern mathematicians." These, at first bequeathed as a public library to the city, became a branch of the Philadelphia Library under certain conditions, one of which was that, barring contingencies, one of the donor's descendants should always hold the office of trustee. And to-day his direct descendant fills the position, and is perhaps the only example in this country of an hereditary officeholder.

The Library lost a few books by its one experience of fire, in 1831, and nearer our own times gained an important addition by a courtesy it was enabled to do the British Government. The story takes us back to the Revolution of 1688. On the flight of James II. from his throne, his lord high chancellor of Ireland converted the state papers of which he had custody into family papers; in other words, he kept them. His grandson, on leaving America about the beginning of this century, presented them to the Library of Philadelphia. This gift, containing the private correspondence of James I. with the Privy



DR. RUSH'S STRONG BOX.

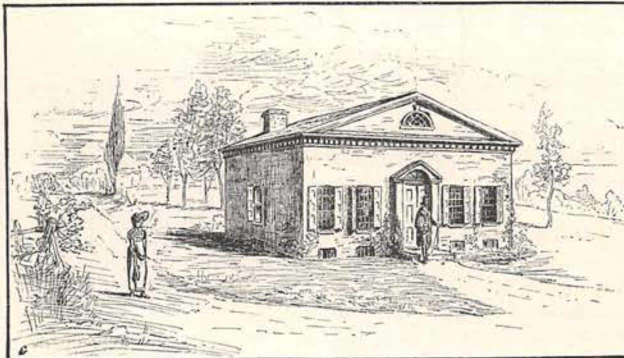
Council of Ireland, the Diary of the Marquis of Clanricarde, a letter of Queen Elizabeth, and other manuscripts, the Company—being bound by no reservation to its giver—took an opportunity of restoring to the British Government. This courtesy was responded to by the gift, on the part of the English, of a large and valuable series of Government publications.

In 1869 died Dr. James Rush, son of Benjamin Rush, and himself well known as the author of a work on the human voice, and as husband of a lady who almost succeeded in naturalizing the *salon* in this country. By his will about one million dollars were devoted to the erection and maintenance of an isolated and fire-proof library-building, which was to be named the Ridgway Library, in memory of his wife. This building was offered to the Philadelphia Company, and the bequest was accepted. That institution had by this time accumulated about one hundred thousand volumes, containing many of those rarities for which there is an eternal struggle between the book-hunter and fire, rats, plate-hunters, worms, and kindred vermin. It owns some fine specimens of illuminated manuscripts, exemplars of Caxton, Fust, and Schœffer, the inventors, or at least sharers in the invention, of printing; of Pynson, Wynkyn de Worde, Sweynheym, and Pannartz; a work of Jenson, believed to be unique; of Koburger, and other works irreplaceable if lost. It is therefore gratifying to those who are aware of the heavy toll fire has levied on knowledge to know that the collection has been, in so far as may be, placed out of reach of a danger which the original "twelve leathern fire buckets and a ladder," procured by the directors, might not have averted.

A building of the Doric order was erected, which with its grounds covers an entire square or block, and is calculated to contain four hundred thousand volumes, or three times as many as the Library at present has, and to this building the more valuable books of the Library were removed in 1878; the fiction and more modern works being placed in another designed in imitation of the old edifice, and nearer the center of the city.

When it is added that Dr. Rush's bequest included also the correspondence and papers of his father,—which contain among many others letters from distinguished persons, letters from Washington, Franklin, Hamilton, Kosciuszko, etc., and that mysterious diary of Benjamin Rush which John Adams alludes to, and which played an important part in the controversy between Mr. Bancroft and Mr. William B. Reed, but which nobody seems to have viewed,—it will be seen that few more valuable gifts have been made to the public. To the public, it may be said, for although this library is in its origin and maintenance entirely a private institution, the use of its books is freely given to any respectable reader. I have tried briefly to show that this oldest American library has had an honorable career, and exerted an appreciable and wholly good influence; while illustrating something of that peculiar character of quietness which Philadelphia has retained since Penn directed that the people should so build their houses "that there may be ground on each side for gardens, or orchards, or fields, that it may be a green country town, which will never be burnt and always wholesome." Indeed, few institutions have been more naturally the growth of a community, or better illustrate the good effects of such unstimulated growth, than the old Philadelphia Library.

Bunford Samuel.



LOGANIAN LIBRARY, SIXTH AND WALNUT STREETS.