



The New York Public Library
New York Public Library Archives

Guide to the

Free Circulating Libraries records

1880-1905

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Compiled by Jim Moske and Robert Sink; machine-readable finding aid created by Jim Moske.

Summary

Creator: Free Circulating Libraries

Title: Free Circulating Libraries records

Date: 1880-1905

Abstract: NYPL Archives Record Group 4 consists of the records of the various independent circulating libraries that consolidated with The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. These records cover the period prior to each library's consolidation with NYPL. The majority of the records in this collection are for the New York Free Circulating Library, the Aguilar Free Library and the Webster Free Library. There are also a few items from Cathedral, Harlem, Maimonides, New York Free Circulating Library for the Blind, and Tottenville Libraries.

Conditions Governing Access:

Access to the collection is restricted to qualified scholars and researchers through the Office of Special Collections, Room 316.

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Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Compiled by Jim Moske and Robert Sink; machine-readable finding aid created by Jim Moske.

Related Materials:

Creator History

During the last quarter of the 19th century a number of separate and independent libraries, formed mostly by private charitable or religious organizations -- but generally free and open to the public -- were established throughout New York City. The largest of these free, circulating libraries was the New York Free Circulating Library (NYFCL). Formed in 1878 for a church sponsored sewing class, the NYFCL grew throughout Manhattan to a system of 11 branches in 1899. Eventually there were 14 such independent libraries in the three boroughs of the Bronx, Manhattan and Staten Island.

Among the most important were the Aguilar Free Library Society and the Webster Free Library. On November 15, 1886, the Aguilar Free Library Society incorporated as a free public library "interested in Jewish communal affairs" and in providing "reading matter for a portion of the city and for classes of its population unreached by any of the existing libraries." It was named after Grace Aguilar (1816-1847) a Sephardic Jewish author. Judge Samuel Greenbaum was the first president of a 15 member Board of Directors which also included offices of Treasurer, Secretary, and Library & Building Committees. Also in 1886, a city law was passed authorizing city aid to free circulating libraries with at least 10,000 volumes, real estate worth \$20,000, and an annual circulation of at least 75,000 volumes. To qualify for this aid, the libraries of the Young Mens Hebrew Association at 721 Lexington Ave (at 57th St.) and the Hebrew Free School at 624 East 5th St. and 206 East Broadway, were merged at the 206 East Broadway building which was purchased by the new Aguilar corporation. The Lexington Avenue location was continued as a branch.

In 1893, Everett P. Wheeler the President of East Side Settlement House (founded in 1891) asked the New York Free Circulating Library (NYFCL) to operate a library in a building to be erected on the Settlement's property. The NYFCL declined to participate in the project because of the cost involved. The Settlement House, however, decided to proceed on its own. Charles B. Webster gave \$10,000 to construct the building, and others donated an additional \$5,000. In addition, Edward Clarence Spofford donated 4,000 volumes to get the library started. The Webster Free Library opened in January 1894 in a building designed by Mr. D.N.B. Sturgis. The East Side Settlement House appointed a Library Committee to oversee the operations of the new library. The Webster Free Library flourished under the direction of Edwin White Gaillard (1872-1928). The collection grew from 7,000 to 12,000 volumes despite financial constraints on new acquisitions. Gaillard was especially successful in increasing the Library's membership nearly fourfold while circulation rose two-and-a-half times between 1897 and 1903. Gaillard realized that the neighborhood had a growing Czechoslovak community and in April 1897 placed the first Bohemian books on the shelves to meet their needs. By 1899, this growing collection was known as the Bohemian Department of the WFL. This collection continued to serve the Czechoslovak community into the mid-1950s long after the WFL became a branch of the New York Public Library. Edwin Gaillard is also noted for his pioneering work with schools. As early as 1898 he began to concentrate on this new effort and noted in October 1898 that "[w]ork with schools is now giving returns." Gaillard sought contacts with teachers and principals in order to promote cooperation between the schools and the library and to enlist their aid in having pupils join the library. Among his efforts were class visits to the library, providing pupils with assistance with their school assignments, special exhibits, and providing services to teachers. Gaillard had success with these efforts, but he also wanted a greater investment from the Settlement House to build the collection. In February 1901 Gaillard asked that \$6000 be raised to buy new books, but this was regarded as unfeasible by the Settlement House. In October 1902 Gaillard announced that he would resign unless he received a salary increase, was excused from living as a resident at the Settlement House, and the Settlement House committed to improve the WFL building and collections. The Library Committee agreed to Gaillard's terms and he stayed on. Outside events however made it impossible to carry through with the improvement plans. Andrew Carnegie's 1901 gift of \$5.2 million to the City of New York had spurred creation of a branch system at the New York Public Library (NYPL). In 1902 the New York City

Comptroller announced that the City's private libraries would not receive an increase in City subsidies for 1903 and that no monies would be provided in 1904. Bowing to this pressure from the City, the East Side Settlement House voted on December 18, 1903 to give its books to the NYPL if the NYPL would operate the existing site until a new Carnegie branch opened in the neighborhood. The consolidation with NYPL became effective on January 1, 1904, and the new Carnegie building, named the Webster Branch, opened on October 24, 1906.

As popular as such libraries as Aguilar and Webster became with a book-starved public, they suffered from both a lack of coordination and cut-backs of municipal support. The New York Free Circulating Library had discussed the idea of consolidation as early as 1886. In 1895, the newly incorporated New York Public Library (NYPL) was established as a noncirculating reference and research library. But from the very beginning, its trustees left open the possibility that it could establish "such libraries as it deemed advisable." In 1900, due to financial pressures, a formal consolidation between NYPL and NYFCL took place. But it was not until Andrew Carnegie's 1901 offer of \$5.2 million to construct 65 library branches in greater New York that the consolidation movement gained momentum. Between Carnegie's gift, the persuasiveness of Arthur Bostwick (NYPL's first Chief of Circulation), and the City's financial pressures, by 1906 all consolidations were complete.

The following are the dates of existence of the independent free circulating libraries that became part of NYPL: Aguilar Free Library, 1886-1903 (with four branches at time of consolidation with NYPL: 197 East Broadway, 106 Avenue C, 111-113 East 59th Street, 174 East 110th Street); Bronx Free Library, 1901-ca.1905; Cathedral Library, 1887-1905 (with five large branches -- Amsterdam Avenue, Cathedral, St. Raphael's, Sacred Heart and Epiphany -- and seven smaller branches or stations at time of consolidation with NYPL); Harlem Library Association, 1825-1903; High Bridge Free Library, 1901-1906; Inwood Public Library, 1921-1922; Kingsbridge Free Library, 1894-ca.1905; Maimonides Free Library, 1850-1906; New York Free Circulating Library, 1878-1900 (with 11 branches at time of consolidation with NYPL: Bloomingdale, Bond Street, Chatham Square, George Bruce, Harlem, Jackson Square, Muhlenberg, Ottendorfer, Riverside, 34th Street, Yorkville); New York Free Circulating Library for the Blind, 1895-1903; Riverdale Library Association, 1942-1952; St. Agnes Free Library, 1893-1901; Tottenville Library, 1899-1903; University Settlement Library, 1887-1903; Washington Heights Library, 1868-1901; Webster Free Library, 1892-1903.

Scope and Content Note

The Free Circulating Libraries Records consist of the records of the various independent circulating libraries that consolidated with The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. These records cover the period prior to each library's consolidation with NYPL. The majority of the records in this collection are from the New York Free Circulating Library, the Aguilar Free Library and the Webster Free Library. There are also a few items from Cathedral, Harlem, Maimonides, New York Free Circulating Library for the Blind, and Tottenville Libraries.

Arrangement: The records are arranged in twelve series: I. Aguilar Free Library; II. Cathedral Library; III. Harlem Library; IV. High Bridge Free Library; V. Inwood Public Library; VI. Maimonides Free Library; VII. New York Free Circulating Library; VIII. New York Free Circulating Library for the Blind; IX. Riverdale Library Association; X. St. Agnes Free Library; XI. Tottenville Library Association; XII. Washington Heights Free Library; XIII. Webster Free Library.

Key Terms

Subjects

Libraries -- New York (State) -- New York -- Branches, delivery stations, etc

Geographic Names

Manhattan (New York, N.Y.)

Staten Island (New York, N.Y.)

Names

Free Circulating Libraries

Aguilar Free Library

New York Free Circulating Library

Container List

Series I. Aguilar Free Library 1886-1903 (7 boxes)

The Records of the Aguilar Free Library Society cover the period of its independent existence from 1886 to 1903, with the bulk of the material falling into the period 1891-1902. The collection is divided into two subseries: A. Board of Directors; B. Librarian.

A. Board of Directors

- b. 1 f. 1 General records - Printed Ephemera - Alcoves and Bequests brochure n.d.
- b. 1 f. 2 General records - Final Report 1902
- b. 1 f. 3 General records - Corporation documents 1886-1902
Includes: Act of Incorporation, 1886; List of property and assets, Nov. 1902; Call for architect's bids and plans for 110th St. branch, 1898; Committee on consolidation with NYPL report, Dec 1902; Bylaws of the Aguilar Free Library Society; Papers regarding the sale the East Broadway and Jefferson St. building to the Educational Alliance, April-Dec. 1902.
- b. 1 f. 4 General records - Voice of the Aguilar Free Library 1891
- b. 1 f. 5 President - Appropriation Requests 1891-1902
Made to the New York City Board of Estimate containing summarized financial and some circulation statistics
- b. 1 f. 6 President - Circulation reports 1892-1902
Made to the New York State Regents to qualify for state aid and tax exemptions; contains various library statistics in addition to circulation
- b. 1 f. 7-8 Treasurer - Accounting records - Bills Paid 1900-1903
Monthly and annual summaries for Library expenses (by Branch), including: salaries, books and periodicals, printing and stationary, binding, rents & mortgages, furnishings and utilities
- b. 2 Secretary - Minutes 1891-1898 (Bound volume)
- v. 1
- b. 3 Library and Building Committees Reports 1898-1902
Monthly and annual reports to the Library and Building (also called House) Committees regarding staffing and collections and building repairs and maintenance. Contains some book and magazine lists, as well as names of staff and salaries.

B. Librarian

- b. 4 Day Book, 59th St Branch 1897-1903
Diary/day book kept by unidentified staff member of the 59th Street Branch. Discusses 2 book system, open shelving, working conditions, etc.
- b. 5 Reports 1895-1903
Monthly and annual reports (for each Branch and the Traveling Library) to the Board of Directors; Material overlaps with Library and Building Committee Reports and Treasurer's records
- b. 6 f. 1 Classified Lists of Books 1880s-1890s
- b. 6 f. 2 Pleasures and Profits of Reading n.d.
- b. 6 f. 3 Salary Schedule 1898
- b. 7 Montefiore Album Awarded By Popular Vote to The Aguilar Free Library at the Art Gallery of the Fair in Aid of the Montefiore Home for Chronic Invalids 18 Dec. 1886 (Scrapbook containing five original letters and seven photoprints of Moses Montefiore (1784-1885). Includes printed program from Montefiore's 99th birthday celebration, 8 Nov. 1883.)

Map case 300-A-2 Aguilar Library Award, Education Alliance and Hebrew Technical Institute Certificate from the Educational Fair 1895

Series II. Cathedral Library Association 1893-1906

- b. 8 f. 1 Annual Reports to New York State 1893-1904
- b. 8 f. 2 Final Report 1905

Series II. Cathedral Library Association (cont.)

- b. 8 f. 3 Gift Acknowledgment from The New York Public Library 1900-1901
- b. 8 f. 4 Gift Acknowledgment from New York State Library (M. Dewey) 1903
- b. 8 f. 5 Letters 1901
- b. 8 f. 6 Printed ephemera n.d.
- b. 8 f. 7 Rules and regulations n.d.
- b. 8 f. 8 Transfer of Books to The New York Public Library 1906

Series III. Harlem Library 1892-1902

- b. 9 f. 1 Annual Reports 1892-1902
- b. 9 f. 2 Printed ephemera n.d.

Series IV. High Bridge Free Library 1901-1906

- b. 10 Incorporation and Consolidation Documents 1901-1906

Series V. Inwood Public Library 1921-1923

- b. 11 f. 1 Correspondence 1921-1923
- b. 11 f. 2 Historical Souvenir of Opening of Inwood Public Library 1921
- b. 11 f. 3 Historical Souvenir and History of Inwood Public Library 1922
- b. 11 f. 4 Newsclippings n.d.
- b. 11 f. 5 Program 1923
- b. 11 f. 6 Semi-annual Meeting 1921

Series VI. Maimonides Free Library 1903-1906

- b. 12 Printed ephemera 1903-1906

Series VII. New York Free Circulating Library

- b. 13 f. 1-10 Annual Reports 1880s-1900
- b. 13 f. 11 Buildings Committee 1880-1883, 1894-1900
- b. 13 f. 12 Circulars 1879-1881
- b. 13 f. 13 Consolidation n.d.
- b. 13 f. 14 Constitution 1880
- b. 13 f. 15 Employment Application 1890s
- b. 13 f. 16 Library Committee n.d.
- b. 13 f. 17 News Clippings n.d.
- b. 13 f. 18 Personnel n.d.
- b. 13 f. 19 Printed Ephemera n.d.
- b. 13 f. 20 Secretary 1880-1897
- b. 13 f. 21 Secretary - Address Book n.d.
- b. 14 f. 1 Travelling Library Department--Books for Public Schools 1901[?]
- b. 14 f. 2 Treasurer - Accounts 1880-1881
- b. 14 f. 3 Treasurer - Reports 1880-1896
- b. 14 f. 4 Ways and Means Committee 1882-1899
- b. 15 f. Branches - Bond Street Branch, Use Statistics 1882-1897
- b. 16 f. 1 Branches - George Bruce Branch - Catalogue 1897
- b. 16 f. 2 Branches - George Bruce Branch - Statistics - Circulation and Members
January 1888 - August 1902
- b. 17 f. 1 Branches - Muhlenberg Branch - Accession Book 1892-1893

Series VII. New York Free Circulating Library (cont.)

- b. 17 f. 2 Branches - Muhlenberg Branch - Financial Journal 1893-1899
- b. 17 f. 3 Branches - Muhlenberg Branch - Move 1896
- b. 17 f. 4 Branches - Muhlenberg Branch - Registration Book 1893-1898
- b. 18 f. 1 Branches - Ottendorfer Branch Catalog - First Division - German Books 1884
- b. 18 f. 2 Branches - Ottendorfer Branch - Catalog - Second Division - English Books 1884
- b. 18 f. 3 Branches - Ottendorfer Branch - Circulation Statistics December 1884 - May 1899
- b. 18 f. 4 Branches - Ottendorfer Branch - Opening - Clippings 1884
- b. 18 f. 5 Branches - Ottendorfer Branch - Rules 1884 [Photocopy
- b. 18 f. 6 Branches - Ottendorfer Branch - Vault Application n.d.
- b. 19 f. 1 Ottendorfer Family - Anna Ottendorfer - In Memoriam Anna Ottendorfer 1884
Inscribed by Oswald Ottendorfer to Wilhelm Kurtz. 3 copies.
- b. 19 f. 2 Ottendorfer Family - Oswald Ottendorfer - Biographical
- b. 19 f. 3 Ottendorfer Family - Oswald Ottendorfer - Biographical - Last Will and Testament n.d.
- b. 19 f. 4 Ottendorfer Family - Oswald Ottendorfer - Biographical - Memorial. Zur Erinnerung an Oswald Ottendorfer 1900
Page 65 has NYFCL resolution
- b. 20 Unidentified Branch - Accession Book 1897-1899
- b. 30 f. Oversize material n.d.

Series VIII. New York Free Circulating Library for the Blind 1896-1903

- b. 21 f. 1 Circular 1896
- b. 21 f. 2 Checkbook 1902-1903
- b. 21 f. 3 Extract of Will 1900

Series IX. Riverdale Library Association 1942-1952

- b. 22 Printed material 1942-1952

Series X. St. Agnes Free Library 1895-1900

- b. 31 f. 1 Catalog 1895
- b. 31 f. 2 History ca. 1900
- b. 32 Register of Readers 1894-1898
v.

Series XI. Tottenville Library Association 1899-1903

- b. 23 f. 1 Accession Book 1899-1900
- b. 23 f. 2 Circular 1903
- b. 23 f. 3 Circulation statistics 1899-1903

Series XII. Washington Heights Free Library n.d.

- b. 24 Records n.d.

Series XIII. Webster Free Library 1894-1904 (5 Boxes)

General Files include Library Committee minutes, statistics on circulation, membership, attendance and acquisitions, and a Journal of Events. Children's Work files comprise a single volume entitled *Books Interesting to Girls - Large and Small* prepared by Edwin White Gaillard. This contains pages pasted into a scrapbook which gives the librarian's recommendations for fiction and non-fiction books for younger and older girls. Accession Registers record author, title, publication data, classmark (after May 1897), source, and cost of books. The entries also record when volumes were discarded, transferred or lost. Approximately one-half the entries record how many times the book circulated before it was worn out. This is one of the few records that provides evidence of the popularity of individual items.

- b. 25 f. 1 f. General Files - Bulletin of New Books 1899
- b. 25 f. 2 f. General Files - East Side Literary Society, Constitution & By-Laws 1894
- b. 25 f. 3 f. General Files - East Side Literary Society, Transactions October, 1894 - April, 1895
- b. 25 f. 4 f. General Files - Expenses 1903
- b. 25 f. 5 f. General Files - History Note n.d.
- b. 25 f. 6 f. General Files - Journal of Events 1894
- b. 25 f. 7 f. General Files - Library Committee Minutes 1894, 1898-1903
- b. 25 f. 8 f. General Files - Reports 1901-1903
- b. 25 f. 9 f. General Files - Richmond, Miss. Letter to WSB 1896 (Photocopy)
- b. 25 f. 10 f. General Files - Rules n.d. (Photocopy)
- b. 25 f. 11 f. General Files - Statistics - Circulation, Membership, Attendance, Acquisitions, and Diary Notes June, 1895 - December, 1903
- b. 25 f. 12 f. General Files - Statistics - Volume Count & Circulation 1894-1903
- b. 25 f. 13 f. General Files - Statistics - Volume Count, Circulation & Lost Items 1899-1900
- b. 25 f. 14 f. General Files - To Teachers, from the Library 1902
 - b. 26 *Children's Work - Books Interesting to Girls - Large and Small* n.d.
 - b. 27 Accession register #1-4,960 February, 1894 - July, 1895
 - b. 28 Accession register #4,961-9,900 June, 1895 - March, 1900
 - b. 29 Accession register #9,901-14,900 March, 1900 - September, 1904