

New Mercantile Library history

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New Mercantile Library Association

Baltimore 's Mercantile Library was a subscription library formed in 1839 and located in a building at St. Paul and Saratoga Streets. The library was managed by the Mercantile Library Association who produced a first report in 1840 and a constitution in 1841. John W. M. Lee was appointed librarian, August 1870. Apparently, the library functioned successfully until the mid-1880s. An article in the *Baltimore Herald* [Jan. 3, 1887] reported that the library's collection would be sold resulting in a "public calamity."

Daniel C. Gilman assembled a group of private citizens in Baltimore to support an acquisition of the library's holdings and to establish the New Mercantile Library Association. On December 1, 1886, Charles Bonaparte wrote to Gilman to tell him that the total cost for the volumes would be \$10,000. The sum was raised by contributions from Gilman, George S. Brown, Charles J. Bonaparte, Robert Garrett, T. Harrison Garrett, Miss Mary E. Garrett, John W. McCoy, B. F. Newcomer, Francis White, and the firm of Wilson, Colston & Co. Henry Stockbridge acted as trustee for the Mercantile Library Association and transferred the books, furniture, and other effects to Gilman and his associates, February 5, 1887. The New Mercantile Library Association was incorporated, Dec. 10, 1887. Shares in the company were sold at \$250.00 "to ladies as well as gentlemen." A Board of Directors was appointed and a Board of Managers was chosen to oversee the direction of the library. The New Mercantile Library was located 305 N. Charles St. An inventory from the old library revealed 2639 volumes. The new library was apparently successful until the 1920s. Some decline in subscriptions was noted in 1902 when the Booklovers' Library opened in Baltimore. The Enoch Pratt Free Library had opened in 1886. The New Mercantile Library closed in 1928, and a gift of books to the Pratt Library was made in 1929.

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Baltimore Mercantile Library

Nov. 24, 1880

Mercantile Library—Proposal to Change its Location to Charles and Saratoga Streets—A Handsome Proffer from Mr. John W. McCoy, &c.

Arrangements have been perfected by which the Mercantile Library, now occupying the basement of the Athenaeum Building, corner of St. Paul and Saratoga streets, will be transferred to the Wilson Sanitarium building, when it is completed, at the northeast corner of Charles and Saratoga streets, and the adjoining property on the north, where a pavilion will be erected. This desirable change will be achieved through the efforts of Mr. John W. McCoy, president of the Library Company, and a liberal disposition on the part of Mr. Francis T. King, president of the Wilson Sanitarium. Mr. McCoy has written a letter, which will be unanimously adopted by the Library board of directors, giving the proposal and plan for the change, as follows:

"Baltimore, November 23, 1880.—To the Board of Directors of the Mercantile Library Association—Gentlemen: In view of the recent annual report of the association, in which we were constrained to say that unless the library should receive friendly aid it would not be long until it would be compelled to permanently close its doors, I have felt it my personal as well as my official duty to canvass all possible methods by which the possible calamity and public discredit of its stopping can be averted. One very general ground of the public neglect in recent years is unquestionably the library's location. It has thus far been entirely without the means of getting a better home. New quarters could not be had anywhere, without the association's corporate ownership of ground and building, that would cost fifty thousand dollars or more; or its occupancy under large rent of property not its own. The library's present unpopular location has had at least this great advantage, that its premises have been practically free of rent, thus saving to the institution from two thousand to three thousand dollars a year.

"Believing personally, and knowing that you all concur with me, that a change of place is imperatively needed in order to keep the library alive, but there being grave doubt as to how far a new location would enable the association to meet an added annual rent of two to three thousand dollars, I have determined to assume as my personal hazard whatever monetary risk may come in making so desirable and, as we know, so indispensable a change.

"In this view I have personally agreed with Mr. Francis T. King, president of the Thomas Wilson Sanitarium, to pledge myself for the rent of new quarters for the library for five years, at the price of twenty-five hundred dollars per annum; my whole agreed upon advance for this purpose being twelve thousand five hundred dollars.

"To perfect my plans I have been compelled thus far to keep this matter strictly to myself. Now, however, that the arrangement is complete between Mr. Francis T. King, president, and myself, I am glad to convene you to ask your concurrence in my plans.

"The buildings which the Wilson Sanitarium has agreed to lease the library upon my pledge for five years' rent are upon a site that I have long considered the very best in the city for our purpose. They are, first, the elegant and commodious structure now in course of erection at the northeast corner of Charles and Saratoga streets, fifty feet front on Charles street by eighty feet on the quiet hillside of Saratoga street. All this great area may be made one admirable reading-room. In addition to this property there will be, adjoining it on the north and fronting on Charles street twenty-five feet or more, a commodious pavilion of beautiful architecture, of one very high story, and running back 80 feet to an open and well-lighted area. The pavilion itself, besides one large triple window on Charles street and two at its back, will be abundantly lighted in daytime by three large sky-lights in the roof. In this pavilion building alone we can place in full light, with easy access and perfectly free from damp, all the books of the library. The association is to have the use of the ground floor of both these buildings. The large reading-room will open directly into the library pavilion through three ample arches; the dividing wall is to be practically made of the whole ground floor one space only, fronting 75 feet on Charles street and 80 feet on Saratoga street. The association will also have the use of the whole basement of the reading-room for its business office, directors' room, for storage, and for a gentlemen's dressing room. An

ample cloak room for ladies will be provided on the main or ground floor, and all the apartments will be comfortably heated by steam. The buildings will have fully one hundred and fifty-five feet of face upon Charles and Saratoga streets, their walls marked by stately windows, offering at all times one of the brightest views of moving life to be found in our city. The architecture of both the main corner house and the pavilion is such that, in my judgment, the two structures will be among the most elegant in Baltimore. They are to be in the style of Queen Anne's time, and to be built of red brick with black mortar, trimmed and otherwise ornamented with Cheat River stone of fine quality, the corner building to be four stories high. When completed the two structures will conspicuously ornament this admirable site, and at night the lighted windows around so extended a front will make a bright and cheerful spectacle. The rooms themselves, I am sure, can be made so attractive that they will soon become the daily resort of the most intelligent men and women in our community.

"I have told you, gentlemen, what I have done in securing a new home for the library. I have had strong prompting motives to my action. Myself a member of the association for more than thirty years, and for twelve years before the war—a member of its board of government, the colleague during all that period of the late Charles Bradenbaugh, who by his able administration of the library's affairs built it up from small beginnings, and thus, through the devoted labor of years as its president, did more to supply this community with the means of personal culture than did any citizen who preceded him; recently called with you to try to retrieve the library's affairs, I believe that the new home I have procured will give the association a new lease of life, and enable it to be throughout a long future an effective helper to the intelligence and general well-being of our people.

"The money I propose to advance as pledge for five years' rent I will under no circumstances receive any interest for. If the library shall prosper so as to pay its rent without my aid I shall have a becoming pride in its prosperity. Should it finally fail in this, (and that it will finally fail I do not for a moment believe,) I shall consider my money well invested in the endeavor to raise the fortunes of an institution to which the whole community is indebted, and to which I am personally under obligations that I do not propose to forget, while I recall some of the most precious days of my early manhood and the many friendships long ago made at the library that have been steadfast to this hour.

"If you, gentlemen of the board, shall accept what I so gladly proffer, I do not doubt that the library will show a new and strong power of doing good. To sustain this power will, I hope, be the willing duty of my fellow-citizens. I have that knowledge of the ability and that faith in the liberality of the prosperous mercantile, manufacturing and professional classes in Baltimore that make me assured that they will not rest content with my having made the association secure for the rent in a new home, but that they will, at an early time, by liberal gifts, endow an institution so useful to all of them with such solid fund as shall, by its accruing interest, enable the association to properly equip its new rooms, and to be, year after year, a liberal buyer of books.

Let this be done and our city will not have the Mercantile Library die in its sight; will not be discredited with having no such institution within all its borders, but will establish safely and permanently a popular leading library worthy of Baltimore.

"In conclusion I beg to say that if the public of Baltimore will raise for the library such a fund as will produce, when invested, even three thousand dollars per annum, I will gladly and gratefully add to that fund by converting ten thousand dollars of my present advance into an absolute gift.

JOHN W. MCCOY,
President, Mercantile Library Association.
The Wilson Building will be occupied in the upper stories for offices of the Sanitarium Trust and for the Fuel Savings Society, which was also endowed by the late Thos. Wilson. It is possible also that the Women's Industrial Exchange will find office quarters in the upper stories of the building. The Sanitarium itself will be established in some other locality at a future day.