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## The Book Company: Durham's First Library

By EDWARD N. HINMAN

Unplanned, but nonetheless fascinating from a historical point of view, is the coincidence of this fall's referendum in Durham for a new public library and the 250th anniversary on October 30 of the establishment of "The Book Company of Durham."

"The Book Company of Durham" was founded on Oct. 30, 1733, by eight prominent residents of Durham who were "desirous to improve our leisure hours in enriching our minds with useful and profitable knowledge by reading, (but) do find ourselves unable to do for want of suitable books...."

The concept of social libraries had existed in England for a number of years, and hence the idea of establishing one in Durham undoubtedly was based on the early settlers' experiences in their homeland. There seems little doubt that the Durham Company was the second oldest proprietary library founded in America, and the first in New England.

Many of the early residents of Durham were educated men and were familiar with libraries. Col. Elihu Chauncey, the grandson of one of Durham's early pastors (the Rev. Nathaniel Chauncey), who had an extensive personal library, was apparently the chief motivator for the Book Company. He is listed as the "first clerk and library keeper," which positions he held for 48 years.

Early Durham records suggest that the first books were kept in the Chauncey house, located at the end of Fowler Avenue, on the site of Herbert Otte's house. Subsequently, the library's books were located in the Rev. Elnathan Chauncey's home.

### 20 Shillings Apiece

The original eight members of the Book Company contributed 20 shillings apiece for the purchase of books, and these books were to be "kept as a common stock for the use of said Company...." By 1747, the number of subscribers had increased to 21, and this number had

grown to sixty-three by 1766. There are no records extant covering the development of the Book Company during the Revolutionary War, but in 1782 the Rev. Elizur Goodrich became the "clerk" and Bridgeman Garnsey was appointed "keeper of the Library."

It was decided in 1782 that only residents of Durham could become new members of the library. In 1788 the "old company" was reorganized and revitalized. Books were to be purchased which were "not only entertaining, but instructive, and tending to advance useful knowledge, and especially promote the true principles of Christian piety, virtue and good manners among all, particularly among the rising generation...."

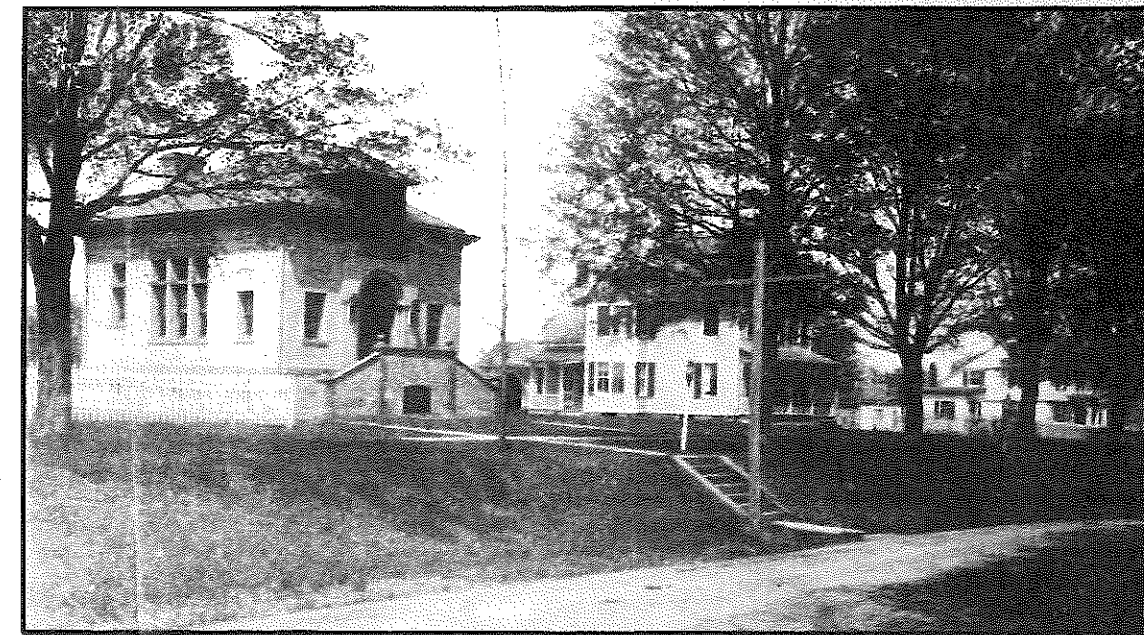
The Book Company had had a reputation as being a "bunch of religious books," and, although undoubtedly an exaggeration, there is probably some truth to it since the early Connecticut settler was indeed serious about his religion, and it was the focal point of his life.

After the 1788 reorganization, the purchase of books became more "liberal," and included literature, histories and geographies. Membership continued to expand, and a number of non-Durham residents were elected as shareholders, including the president of Yale College in 1793.

In 1789, the Ethosian Society, a sort of second Durham Library and debating group, requested to be assimilated into the Book Company. The library continued in existence well into the 19th century, but its membership and activities began to diminish. In 1856, the last remaining fifteen members voted to dissolve the company and "divide the books by auction." When the books were auctioned in 1856, the library had 448 editions, of which approximately 300 are believed still to exist today. "After 123 years, the Library gave way to modern times, newspapers and light reading, and passed out of existence."

### Big Asset to Town

In Fowler's *History of Dur-*



The present Durham Library, shown in this post card from Edward Hinman, as it appeared in the early part of this century. It was built in 1901. No picture exists of Durham's first library, The Book Company, which was founded in 1733 and closed in 1856 when people appeared to lose interest in reading books.

ham, the author states that "it was this Library that helped to make the voice of Durham potent in the legislature for sixty years. It was this Library that helped to refine the manners of the people, and which gave their high character to the emigrants from Durham...."

Thirty-eight years after the dissolution of the Durham Book Company, a town vote established the present library. At first, books were kept in the Town Hall; later, some were kept in the nearby

Centre School, now the home of the Durham Historical Society. A movement to construct a town library gradually developed, simultaneously with the increase in volumes and patrons. The 1900 Town Annual Report stated, "Books are as necessary today (in 1900) for the education and entertainment of a community as in the past, when the people were known throughout the state as men and women of great intelligence, refinement, energy and activity." The cornerstone of Durham's present library was laid

in 1901. At that time, it had the capacity of 5,000 volumes. At the present time, the number of volumes approaches 20,000, with a patron list of approximately 3,500.