

NOTES FOR A HISTORY OF THE LIBRARY COMPANY OF PHILADELPHIA.

(From Waldie's Port Folio and Companion to the Select Circulating Library.)

More than a century may be said to have elapsed since the first idea of establishing a public library in the city of Philadelphia was agitated, and as considerable interest has been expressed to learn accurately the early history of the institution now under consideration, I have employed some research, and considerable time, in throwing together the following notes.

The time is coming when the history of our public institutions will be sought after with avidity, and it may arrive when their records will be lost or destroyed; it seems to be therefore a duty we owe to posterity to preserve in some suitable manner an account, to which the antiquarian many refer in the absence of other data, and the period of a century will not be considered as too early to commence the task, particularly of an institution which continues to maintain the first stand among the literary establishments of the United States, and which has numbered among its members our most respectable citizens, and has on its list of directors the names of Franklin, Rush, T. Godfrey, Charles Thomson, John Dickinson, &c.

Fortunately for our purpose, the early records of the Library Company of Philadelphia have been preserved with a care commensurate with their value, and I shall have frequent occasion to quote from the volumes of the minutes of the directors, carefully "collected, copied and continued by Francis Hopkinson," for a long period their secretary and a devoted friend of letters. These minutes he has recorded from the particular and graphic copy made by Joseph Breintnall, the original secretary whose first entry is in the following words, viz:

"The minutes of me, Joseph Breintnall, Secretary to the Directors of the Library Company of Philadelphia, with such of the minutes of the same directors as they order me to make, begun on the 8th day of November, 1731. By virtue of the deed or instrument of the said company, dated the first day of July last.

"The said instrument being completed by fifty subscriptions, I subscribed my name to the following summons or notice which Benjamin Franklin sent by a messenger, viz:

"To Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Hopkinson, William Parsons, Philip Syng, jun., Thomas Godfrey, Anthony Nicholas, Thomas Cadwalader, John Jones, jun., Robert Grace, and Isaac Penington.

Gentlemen—The subscription to the library being completed, you the directors appointed in the instrument, are desired to meet this evening at 5 o'clock, at the house of Nicholas Scull, to take bond of the treasurer for the faithful performance of his trust, and to consider of and appoint a proper time for the payment of the money subscribed, and other matters relating to the said library.

Jos. BREINTNALL, Sec'y.

Philad. 8th Nov., 1731."

At this meeting a treasurer, William Coleman, duly executed a bond with sureties, and Benjamin Franklin proposed that the said Coleman attend at suitable places to receive the subscription moneys, which, says our secretary, "it was the general opinion should not be delayed, lest the directors be disappointed in sending it to England this fall to purchase books, or that other disappointments, prejudicial to the library design, should happen by delays or negligence on any hand."

The price of a share was fixed at forty shillings, and on the first evening of attendance for that purpose ten persons appeared and paid the amount of their subscriptions. Several individuals, however, were dilatory in meeting their engagements, and B. Franklin printed and sent them notice either to pay on a certain evening or signify their determination to relinquish the copartnership; much difficulty and no little forbearance appears to have been the lot of the directors and treasurer, in collecting from some of the original subscribers; but satisfied of the utility of the project, at a meeting on the 29th of March 1732, the sum in hand being "above half" the amount originally intended to be raised, it was concluded to be the interest of all concerned to send for some of the books immediately. Thomas Godfrey at this meeting informed the directors that Mr. James Logan had heard of the plan and would willingly give his advice in the choice of books; the minute on the subject is in these words, "upon this information, Thomas Godfrey was requested to return the thanks of the committee to Mr. Logan for his generous offer—and the committee esteeming Mr. Logan to be a gentleman of universal learning, and the best judge of books in these parts, ordered that Thomas Godfrey should wait on him, and request him to favour them with a catalogue of suitable books against to-morrow evening, which T. G. readily agreed to do."

With the advice of Mr. Logan the list was made out, and Robert Grace, "to expedite the affair," agreed to draw on Peter Collinson, mercer, in Gracious street, London, for "£45 sterling at 65 per cent. advance the current rate," in favour of and to be remitted by Thomas Hopkinson then about sailing for England, with directions to purchase as many volumes as he could for the money. The catalogue of this first effort evinces considerable judgment, and was very carefully prepared with a view to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge in the various departments required by the wants of a young community. Charles Brockden having generously executed the original constitution without charge, the directors unanimously agreed to present him with a share "as some acknowledgment of this and other favours." Joseph Breintnall, Philip Syng, and Benjamin Franklin, were afterwards presented "with the freedom of the company (that is, excused from paying the yearly contribution); Breintnall for his trouble as secretary, six years,

