

The Making of a Small-Town Library: The Lempster Free Public Library

Deborah A. Stone

Lempster is a small town of about a thousand people, nestled between Mt. Sunapee and the Connecticut River. Its public library was established in 1892 as the Lempster Free Public Library and occupied a room on the second floor of the town meeting hall in what was then the center of town. In the mid-1960s the library was moved to the former Universalist Chapel in East Lempster and renamed Miner Memorial Library for Alonzo Ames Miner, prominent leader of the Universalist Church in Boston in the nineteenth century and probably Lempster's most eminent native son.

Lempster has always been a small town—its population peaked at 999 in 1830—but in 1892, when its public library was founded, the town was in serious decline, having dropped to only 519 people in 1890. The total valuation of land, buildings, livestock, and other assets in the year of the library's founding was only \$187,215, and that figure, too, had been dropping precipitously.¹ The town report for 1892 lists two miscellaneous dis-

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1. Population figures are from the New Hampshire State Planning and Development Commission, *Population of New Hampshire*, Part I: Basic Data on Growth and Distribution Since the Time of Settlement, 1623–1940 (Concord, 1946), 18–19; valuation figures are from *Lempster Town Report*, Year Ending March 1, 1893, 1, and annual town reports.



Lempster Meeting House, site of Lempster Free Public Library from 1892–1964. Photograph by Bryant F. Tolles Jr. NHHS Collections, Neg. 326.

bursements to "H. Parker": one for \$25 "for town library," and another for \$100 "for fitting room for library." The outlay of \$125 for a public library may not seem like much today, but it represented a substantial commitment for the town in a year when the total spending on highways was \$638, and the school budget was little over \$700. One might reasonably wonder why and how a town of such limited size and means came to create a public library.

Since there are no minutes of early town meetings or other records about library discussions, we really do not know what the townspeople thought about establishing a public library. But we do know that Lempster was part of a broad public library movement in New Hampshire in the late 1880s and early 1890s.² Many of New Hampshire's larger cities and towns had established public libraries even earlier, in the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s. Libraries were a popular form of civic philanthropy for businessmen and industrialists.³

Claremont, for example, was a thriving manufacturing town in the second half of the nineteenth century, and its public library began in 1873 with a gift of two thousand books from one of its businessmen, Samuel P. Fiske. Fiske owned a paper manufacturing plant, Fiske & Blake. Fiske's collection was originally housed in a room in the high school, but a few years later, in 1877, the town purchased the Bailey Block and renovated it to accommodate the public library. Then in 1912, with funds from Andrew Carnegie, the town built the current library building on Broad Street.⁴ Nearby Newport tells much the same story.

2. Louise Fitz, "The Public Library Movement in New Hampshire," *Granite Monthly*, XV, 11 (1893).

3. James L. Garvin, "Architecture: A Search for Style," in Shirley Gray Adamovich, ed., *The Road Taken: The New Hampshire Library Association, 1889-1989* (West Kennebunk, Maine: Phoenix Publishing, Published for the New Hampshire Library Association, 1989), 62.

4. Otis F. R. Waite, *History of the Town of Claremont* (Manchester, N.H.: John B. Clarke Co., 1895), 146-150; and Henry H. Metcalf, "Historical Ad-

Dexter Richards, owner of the Dexter Richards & Sons Woolen Mills in Newport, gave the town a library in 1877 and provided the funds to build a huge Victorian edifice across from the town common.⁵

Small rural towns like Lempster, however, did not share in the prosperity and growth of the manufacturing economy. In the late nineteenth century, when industrial New Hampshire was booming, the small farming towns were already in decline. They were losing population as their younger citizens moved to the cities to work in the mills or to make other careers. Nevertheless, even some of these small towns benefited—especially through the receipt of donated libraries—from the wave of philanthropy that was sweeping the state. Men, and occasionally women, who had moved away and made their fortunes elsewhere sometimes donated a library to their home town. For example, Lempster's neighbor, Alstead, a town of about the same size, has the Shedd-Porter Memorial Library, a grand stone building with a Greek portico and a huge copper dome. John Shedd, born in Alstead, made his fortune with Marshall Field & Co. in Chicago and gave the library to his hometown in 1890.⁶ The town of Warner boasts the imposing Romanesque library building donated in 1891 by its native son, George C. Pillsbury, who became the nation's cereal king.⁷

Lempster, not having a wealthy patron for a library, made its library on its own, and in that sense it represents a special pattern in New Hampshire library development. Public libraries may have flourished in New Hampshire, but only about ten of

dress on the Occasion of Claremont's 150th Anniversary, October 26, 1914," *Granite Monthly*, XLVI, 11–12 (1914) (New Series 9, 11–12): 407.

5. Barbara Holden Yeomans, *The Richards Free Library: Its First Hundred-and-Three Years* (Newport, N.H.: Friends of the Richards Free Library, 1993).

6. James Duane Squires, *The Granite State of the United States: A History of New Hampshire from 1623 to the Present*, II (New York: the American Historical Company, 1956), 466.

7. Garvin, "Architecture," 63.

the 130 library buildings built before 1930 were financed wholly with community funds.⁸ Lempster was one of the towns that assembled and operated a public library almost entirely with local funds, existing buildings, small donations of books, and a good deal of volunteer labor. Lempster never did, and never had to, build a special building for its library. When the town paid for fitting a room for a library in 1892, the room was upstairs in the town hall. Most of the money probably went to building shelves. For the next twenty-five years, the only building expenses were for operation and maintenance—small payments for wood, oil, and lamp chimneys.

Lempster and the Public Library Movement in New Hampshire

Like many towns, Lempster had a social library long before it had a public library. The biography of Alonzo Miner, born in 1814, notes that there was a social library in Lempster during his youth, and an 1896 essay on Lempster's history attributes much of the town's "educational advantages" to a "library of some two hundred volumes" formed around 1800.⁹ Social libraries were private libraries maintained by a group of townspeople and often chartered by the state legislature. Only members of the library, usually men of some means, could use it. Sometimes, however, these libraries were open to others for a small fee, and in some towns the libraries were open to all people in a school district or the whole town. Typically, these libraries would start as a collection of books in someone's house, and the books would be circulated among the members. When the collection outgrew private homes, the group would find a building to house it, often a local store, town hall, or parsonage.

8. *Ibid.*, 62.

9. George H. Emerson, *Life of Alonzo Ames Miner, S.T.D., LL.D.* (Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1896), 12. Helen Bingham, "History of Lempster," in D. Hamilton Hurd, ed., *History of Cheshire and Sullivan Counties, New Hampshire* (Philadelphia: J. W. Lewis & Co., 1896), II, 185–199; see reference to library on 191.

During this period, social libraries were quite common—there were some 156 social libraries in New Hampshire by 1820.¹⁰

Social libraries were important cultural resources for a community, but they were limited to those people who could afford to join. All over New Hampshire there was a desire in the mid-nineteenth century to make books and libraries available to everyone. In 1833 the town of Peterborough created the state's first town public library—a library open to all citizens of the community. In 1849 the New Hampshire legislature passed the nation's first state law permitting towns to raise money for libraries by taxing their citizens.¹¹ Towns could now raise money for purchasing books, as well as for buying land, constructing library buildings, and operating and maintaining public libraries.

By the end of the century, the state took a more active role in promoting the establishment of local public libraries. In 1891 the state legislature created a Board of Library Commissioners to nurture existing public libraries and foster the development of new ones. Along with this commission came what we would now call a state grant program. The commissioners were empowered to give up to one hundred dollars' worth of books to any town that did not already have a public library, so long as the town met certain conditions. First, a town had to vote to accept the books that would be given by the commission. (The commission selected the books—see Appendix—so the towns had no choice in the particular books they would acquire.) Second, a town had to provide for the “care, custody, and distribu-

10. Adamovich, *The Road Taken*, 3 and 83; and Squires, *The Granite State*, I, 347–348. Louise Fitz, “The Public Library Movement,” writes that the initial membership fee was typically \$6 or \$8, plus a small annual fee. James F. Brennan notes that social libraries were often semi-public and allowed use by the school district or whole town. See Brennan, “Peterborough Town Library: The Pioneer Public Library,” *Granite Monthly*, XXVIII, 5 (1906): 282.

11. Herbert W. Denio, “Library Legislation in New Hampshire,” *Granite Monthly*, XXVI, 3 (1899): 175.

tion of the books" in a way that satisfied the commissioners, which meant establishing a public library and electing library trustees. And third, a town could receive the grant only if it made an annual appropriation of a certain size, which depended on the value of the town's property.¹²

Eighty-one towns, including Lempster, voted the next year to meet the conditions of the Library Commission and accept a grant. In its first report in 1892, the Board of Library Commissioners counted Lempster as one of the fifty-seven towns that had "already complied with the provisions of the law sufficiently to be entitled to one hundred dollars' worth of books from the State."¹³ The lure of a state grant from the Board of Library Commissioners was no doubt a significant, if not determining, factor in Lempster's decision to establish a library. The wording of the warrant article for town meeting on March 8, 1892, when the town voted to establish the Lempster Free Public Library, makes clear the influence of the state grant:

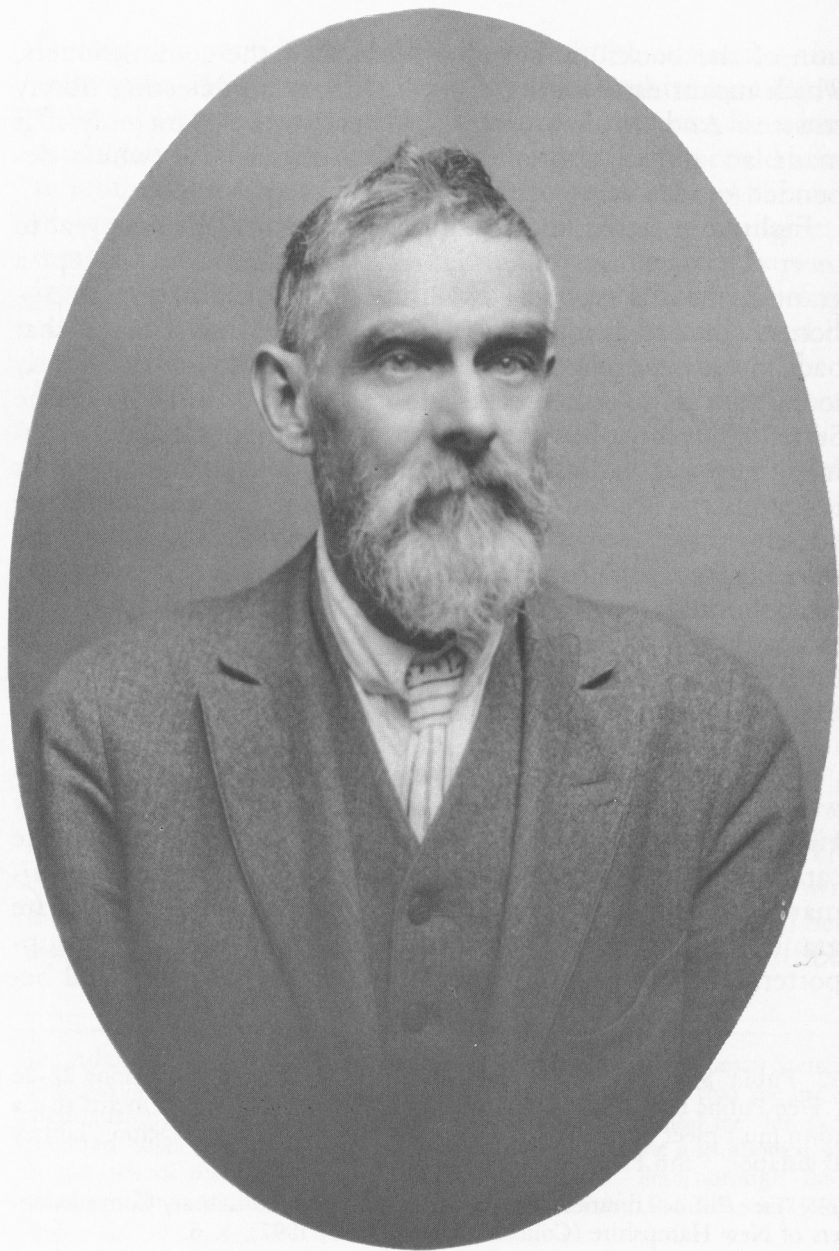
To see if the Town will elect a board of Library trustees and appropriate the money necessary to secure the gift of one hundred dollars worth of books from the state.¹⁴

The Board of Library Commissioners' grant-in-aid program was clearly a great stimulus to library formation in small New Hampshire towns, and the program appears to have been the catalyst for Lempster's public library as well. But libraries are ultimately created by people, not anonymous programs. For a state grant program to have taken effect, there must have been supporters who cherished libraries both for their own personal be-

12. Public Statutes of New Hampshire, 1891, Chapter 8, Sections 21-26 ("Free Public Libraries"). Sections 24 and 25 detail the requirements that a town must meet to receive the state grant of books. See also Denio, "Library Legislation"; and Fitz, "The Public Library Movement."

13. "Free Public Libraries," First Report of the Board of Library Commissioners of New Hampshire (Concord, December 1, 1892), 5, 6.

14. Warrant for Town Meeting, March 8, 1892, Article 10; in Lempster Historical Society archives, Box 1890-1899.



Hiram Parker. Photograph courtesy of author.

liefs and purposes, and for the social goals and ideals they held. What sort of people created the Lempster Free Public Library, and what did a public library mean to them?

The Parkers: Lempster's "Library Family"

The "H. Parker" listed in the 1893 town report to whom the town paid \$100 for "fitting the library" is recorded in the handwritten treasurer's notebook as Hiram Parker.¹⁵ In 1917, when Lempster celebrated its 150th birthday, Hiram, at age eighty-eight, was chairman of the Anniversary Committee and president of the occasion. In his historical address on that day, state historian Henry Metcalf described Hiram Parker as Lempster's "oldest and most honored citizen," and "a friend of every man, woman and child in Lempster."¹⁶ In its front-page obituary notice in 1925, the *New Hampshire Argus and Spectator* wrote that Hiram Parker "had held all the offices in the gift of his townsmen."¹⁷

Hiram Parker was indeed something of a professional citizen. He was a selectman for thirteen years and a member of the school board for six, usually serving as its chair. When Lempster had a High School Committee in the 1890s, Hiram Parker was on it. At various times he served as town clerk, town treasurer, town auditor, surveyor, and overseer of the poor. He was on the first Board of Library Trustees and probably continued as a trustee

15. Treasurer's record book for Lempster, 1892–1906, Lempster Historical Society archives, Box 1890–1899, 19.

16. Henry Metcalf, "Lempster's 150th Anniversary," *Granite Monthly*, XLIX, 9–10 (1917) (New Series, 12, 9–10); "Oldest and Most Honored Citizen" is on 174, and "friend of every . . ." on 192. Henry Metcalf was born in Newport (about ten miles from Lempster) but moved to Lempster in 1852 at the age of eleven. He lived there and went to Lempster's common schools until age sixteen. He later became New Hampshire's state historian and also founded and edited the *Granite Monthly*. Probably because of his personal connection to Lempster and the Parker family, there is more coverage of the town and this family than there otherwise might have been.

17. *New Hampshire Argus and Spectator* (February 27, 1925), 1.

through 1897. Henry Metcalf reports that Hiram was unanimously reelected as town moderator at age seventy-six, in 1906. He served as the representative of Lempster, Marlow, and Acworth to the New Hampshire legislature in 1863–1864 and was a delegate to the 1912 convention to revise the state's constitution.¹⁸

Hiram Parker was born in 1830, one of three children of Benjamin Parker and Olive Nichols.¹⁹ His younger brother was Hosea, and they had an older sister, Emily. They were born and grew up in the "Benjamin Parker Place," on the Hurd Road in Lempster. Hiram attended a district school in Lempster and completed some high school, but his father died at age forty-five, when Hiram was only fifteen. Two years later, in 1847, Hiram took over farming the 150 acres, apparently very successfully. One measure of his success is that he was Sullivan County's representative to the State Agricultural Board for twelve years between 1875 and 1887.²⁰ Another measure is that he was an

18. Information gleaned from annual town reports of Lempster and the following biographical compendia: *Biographical Review: Merrimack and Sullivan Counties, New Hampshire*, 22 (Boston: Biographical Review Co., 1897), 273–275; Ezra S. Stearns, ed., *Genealogical and Family History of the State of New Hampshire*, 1 (New York: Lewis Publishing Co., 1908), 231–233; Henry Harrison Metcalf, ed., *One Thousand New Hampshire Notables* (Concord: Rumford Printing Co., 1919), 10. On his library trusteeship, the town reports do not list library trustees until 1897 and then not every year. However, there is a copy of the library's report submitted to the state Board of Library Commissioners in 1896, which lists Hiram Parker as a trustee with a term expiring in 1897.

19. In addition to the sources cited above, information on the Parker family is gathered from the following sources: Henry H. Metcalf, "Glimpses of Old Lempster," *Granite Monthly*, XXXIX, 8 (1907): 235–266, esp. 248; Henry Metcalf, "Lempster's 100th Anniversary," *Granite Monthly*, LXIX, 9–10 (1917) (New Series, 12, 9–10): 174; and Helen Bingham, "History of Lempster," 192. Bingham indicated that Hiram was a successful farmer and "is at present our village merchant." Also see Jessica Stevens, unpublished genealogical notes, manuscript in Miner Memorial Library, Lempster.

20. Stearns, *Genealogical and Family History*, and the *Biographical Review* both state that Hiram Parker was on the Agricultural Board for only nine years. Metcalf, *One Thousand New Hampshire Notables*, is quite explicit

early member of Lempster's Grange, the Silver Mountain Grange, and served as its master. He later joined the Pomona Grange of Sullivan County.²¹

In 1887 Hiram joined his eldest son Fred in running the general store in the center of Lempster, where, again, he was apparently very successful. Despite Hiram's economic success and his prominence in public affairs, he contributed his physical labor to running the town by helping out with work on the roads. For many years in the 1880s and 1890s, he is listed as one of the men paid for "breaking roads." In 1893, when he was sixty-three, he received \$59.03, making him the person with the second highest number of hours on road work. As the general store owner, Hiram Parker also sold occasional goods to the town.²²

Hosea Parker, Hiram's younger brother by three years, lived on the family homestead until he was about eighteen. With Hiram running the farm, Hosea was able to acquire a more extensive education. He attended an academy in Washington (a neighboring town) and then completed the classical high school course at the Universalist-run Green Mountain Liberal Institute in Woodstock, Vermont. He started college at Tufts University in 1855 but left to study law in Newport with Edmund Burke and after being admitted to the bar, moved to Claremont in 1860 to begin his law practice. He eventually became president of the Sullivan County Bar Association, the representative of Claremont in the New Hampshire legislature (1859), and a representative to the U.S. Congress from 1871–1875.

Hosea was a great advocate of public education in its broadest sense and especially of public libraries. In 1891 he was appointed

about the dates of Parker's membership and that he was elected for four three-year terms. The *New Hampshire Argus and Spectator* obituary also gives the same twelve-year dates of his membership.

21. *Biographical Review*, 274; Stearns, *Genealogical and Family History*, 232.

22. Record book of Town Treasurer, 1892–1906, in Lempster Historical Society archives, Box 1890–1899. Most of the expenditures recorded by hand in this book show up in the annual printed town reports as well.

as one of five members of the first State Board of Library Commissioners, and he served until the commission was abolished in 1903. Closer to home, Hosea became a trustee of the Fiske Free Library in Claremont in 1878, served on the Claremont school board, and for a short time on the Lempster school board as well. While in the New Hampshire legislature, he was on the Committee on Education, and while in the U.S. House of Representatives, he was on the Committee on Education and Labor.²³

Hosea and Hiram's sister, Emily, married Ransom Beckwith and had two sons, Hira R. and Walter P. Beckwith. Hira (sometimes called Hiram) became a prominent architect who had a hand in both of Newport's public library buildings. He designed the original Richards Library in 1887, a grand Victorian structure on Main Street which is now the site of the Sugar River Savings Bank. He was also the contractor who built Col. Seth Richards' private home at 58 North Main Street, which has housed the Richards Library since 1963.²⁴

Walter Beckwith graduated from Tufts College in 1876 and received a master's degree in 1883 and a Ph.D. in 1890, also from Tufts. He became a school administrator in Massachusetts, serving as principal of the high school in Chicopee, superintendent of schools in Adams, and principal of the Salem Normal School. Like his uncles, he was active in public affairs, including promotion of public libraries. For eighteen years he served as chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Public Library in Adams.²⁵ Though Walter never lived in Lempster after completing high school, he was an active supporter of its library later on and donated many books over the years.

23. Henry H. Metcalf, "Hon. Hosea W. Parker," *Granite Monthly*, IV, 12 (1881): 475-478; Otis R. Waite, *History of the Town of Claremont* (Manchester: John B. Clarke & Co., 1895), 149; and Metcalf, "Lempster's 150th Birthday," 174.

24. Yeomans, "Richards Free Library," 9, 16.

25. Metcalf, "Glimpses of Old Lempster," 249; and Carl A. Allen, M.D., "Walter Parker Beckwith," *Granite Monthly*, XXXVIII, 1 (1906) (New Series, 1, 1): 11-17.

Hiram Parker married Helen Moore in 1854, at the age of twenty-four. They had four children, although the second son died in infancy. The oldest, Fred, was born in 1858, and for a while, Hiram and Fred ran the general store under the name "H. and F. C. Parker's." Later, Hiram bought out his son's interest, and Fred moved to Acworth where he operated the general store. But before leaving Lempster, Fred followed in his father's footsteps in public affairs: he was superintendent of the school committee from 1880 through 1884, and his wife, Mary, taught in one of the Lempster district schools. Annual library reports reveal that Fred Parker never forgot the Lempster library even though he had moved away—he, too, donated many books over the years.

Hiram and Helen's daughter, Jennie Louise, was born in 1864 and graduated from Claremont High School. She began teaching in one of the Lempster district schools in 1881, at age seventeen, and continued there for many years, even after she married.²⁶

Hiram and Helen had a late-in-life baby in 1878, when he was forty-eight years old, and she was forty-two. This son, Carl, attended Kimball Union Academy. He was the first librarian of the Lempster Free Public Library, in 1893 and 1894, and went on to serve as a library trustee for twelve years, from 1907 through 1918.

Thus, in 1892 when the Lempster library was founded, Hiram Parker was chair of the school board, built the library room in the town hall, and served as one of the library trustees. His brother, Hosea, was on the State Board of Library Commissioners. His daughter, Jennie, was teaching for her tenth year in District School Number 1. His son, Fred, had chaired the school board for three years in the early 1880s. And his other son, Carl, was the first librarian.

26. High school graduation from Stearns, *Genealogical and Family History*, 232; teaching years from annual town school committee reports; Jennie married Herbert F. Olmstead and in the 1892 town report is listed as Jennie L. Olmstead.

One can get some hint of the passion behind this family's involvement with the Lempster Free Public Library from Fred and Hiram's annual school committee reports. In 1881 Fred referred to a "decided lack of illustrative apparatus and reference books" that had been noted in his predecessor's 1880 report. (Jennie, the teacher, might well have put a bug in his ear.) Then he observed, "We have not seen as any district has taken any heed whatever of his valuable suggestions relating thereto, nor are we very firm in the faith that anything will be done in the year to come." He went on to emphasize the urgent need for new textbooks, especially a spelling book, and a small globe and a dictionary. "They would not cost very much," he assured the taxpayers and then chided them: "Citizens, look into this matter and be up with the times."²⁷

The following year, Fred Parker's frustration with his fellow townspeople was even more evident:

There has been no material change in any district since our last report. Everyone seems to be content to move along in the same "old ruts," year in and year out, never dreaming it would be money well expended to purchase a few simple, yet necessary, things, like dictionaries, globes and wall-maps for our school rooms.²⁸

The town apparently did allow the purchase of a new spelling book, but despite its "good success," Fred complained that it "was looked upon as entirely unnecessary by those who believe there is nothing like 'the good old times and customs of our fathers.'"²⁹

Fred opened his 1893 report with the ritual statement about the success of the school year but then immediately noted "the lack of interest manifested in some districts in educational matters, [and] also the indifference with which new ideas are met. . . ."³⁰ The committee would have liked to purchase new textbooks, he

27. Lempster Town Report, Year Ending March 1, 1881, 13-14.

28. Lempster Town Report, Year Ending March 1, 1882, 9.

29. Town report, 1882, 10.

30. Lempster Town Report, Year Ending March 1, 1883, 7-8.

reported, but did not make any changes "for the reason that there has been such an unwillingness, amounting almost to disrespect on the part of some citizens, to any such change."

Fred seems to have taken a year off from these discouraging school politics, but in the 1885 report he was again the superintendent, and his report was a litany of school deficiencies and town recalcitrance: "There is nothing very different to report in regard to the schools this year from any preceding. Everything seems to follow the '*old ruts*' with wonderful tenacity, and any *new idea* or *way* is not very cordially received. . . . No new textbooks have been introduced. . . . Very few districts have maps and charts worth anything. . . . There is scarcely a schoolhouse in town but that needs repairing." All in all, he concluded, "It has certainly been proven during the past year that any attempt to improve the educational advantages of the town is met with contempt."³¹

Fred surely must have discussed these matters with his father, and when Hiram joined the school board seven years later, in 1890, he would have had more than the ordinary public official's acquaintance with the town's attitudes toward funding education. He seems to have been less dejected than Fred by the town's unwillingness to support schools as fully as he wished, and his reports have a decidedly more positive tone. Still, with every report he tried to nudge the town to higher educational standards and better facilities. His 1890 report ended with a rousing cry to the citizens, a plea with the form and style of a call to arms:

Citizens of Lempster, whatever other interest may fail in this good old town of Lempster, upon whose history memory loves to linger, and who can point with pride to its record, let not the educational interest decline in the least, but plant its standard higher, and yet higher, for in it is anchored *our* safety, and the safety of generations yet to come.³²

31. Lempster Town Report, Year Ending March 1, 1885.

32. Lempster Town Report, Year Ending March 1, 1890, 11.

In 1891, when Hiram chaired the school board, his daughter taught in one of the schools, and his brother was on the new Board of Library Commissioners, he must have seen a great opportunity to persuade the reluctant citizens of Lempster to upgrade their educational facilities. The \$100 worth of books offered by the state was equivalent to nearly one-seventh of the \$748.73 school budget for 1891.³³ Here was a way to get the citizens of Lempster to approve a major increase in educational funding without voting it in the school budget.

Hiram probably had the personality to persuade the taxpayers to support the idea of a public library, and the fact that he continued to be elected to so many offices suggests he was held in high esteem. His school reports, contrasted with Fred's, illustrate his effectiveness. Like Fred, his ideals for the common schools were probably higher than the town's. "The work that has been done during the school year has been all we could have reason to expect," he concluded his first report in 1890, adding "not that it is all we would desire." But he always imputed good will to his fellow citizens and rhetorically drew them into an alliance with him in support of education: "It is a source of pleasure to us, and it must be to the people in town, to report so favorably," he began his 1892 report. "Our school buildings are nearly all more or less out of repair," he observed, but he still thanked the townspeople profusely and respectfully asked for their continued support:

Now, thanking the good people of Lempster for the interest and assistance they have given us during the year now closed, and asking them for a continuance of the same, with such additional aid as they may feel to render in the future, we will now submit this report with the suggestions made, for your serious consideration.³⁴

Finally, in his 1893 report, he made perfectly clear the role he saw for the public library in a town like Lempster:

33. School budget for the 1891 calendar year taken from the Town Report, Year Ending March 1, 1892, 11.

34. Town Report for Year Ending March 1, 1892, 9.

The world is moving forward every year and the only way to keep our place in the march of its progress is to use all the improvements in the methods of instruction and furnish our schools with those things which will interest and instruct the young. And we are pleased that this town, at its last annual meeting, accepted the provision of the law, whereby towns, with a little effort on their own part, have laid the foundation of a free public library, as it will be another means to instruct and improve the youth of our town.³⁵

Hiram's younger son Carl, the first librarian, was considerably more pleased with the town's response to the library than Fred was with its support of schools. In his first report Carl noted that the library was well patronized, and 1,050 books were loaned. "The enthusiasm and interest with which the books have been read has well repaid the state and town for the trouble and expense which has attended the founding of this library."³⁶

The Universalist Society Connection

Just as public programs do not arise without individual commitments and activities, individuals do not arrive at their beliefs and commitments without the influence of larger social and intellectual forces. Vigorous religious dissension and a family commitment to Universalism form the backdrop to the Parker family's involvement with public education and libraries.

Religious upheaval during the period from roughly 1790 to 1830 has been called "the Second Great Awakening." During this period there was a quiet but powerful rebellion against established Protestant churches and especially against Calvinist theology. People participated in this religious expression by forming new sects and churches. While there were many doctrinal differences among the new sects, the essence of their vision was what one recent scholar has called a "democratization

35. Lempster Town Report, Year Ending March 1, 1893, 9.

36. Librarian's Report, in Lempster Town Report, Year Ending March 15, 1894.

of Christianity.”³⁷ Conversion and salvation could be achieved by more people, and the experience of conversion could be evidenced in different ways. Preaching was no longer the preserve of professionally trained ministers, and, instead, lay preaching flourished. Self-proclaimed ministers moved throughout large territories (in contrast to the traditional ministers who settled in one parish) and preached their sermons in more vernacular styles. Popular persuasion rather than approval by a church hierarchy was the test of a minister’s success.

Forming a new church was not easy in the early 1800s because the principle of separation of church and state as we know it was not yet firmly in place. Most towns had established churches (usually Congregationalist), taxed their citizens for support of the minister and the building, and could even compel church attendance. Although there was something of a right of exemption from town church taxes as early as 1693, the laws were ambiguous, and petitions for exemption were subject to intense political controversy and power struggles. Not until 1819 in New Hampshire, when the state passed the Act of Toleration, was there a firm guarantee that people could not be compelled to pay a town church tax against their will. This law permitted taxpayers to obtain an exemption from the portion of town taxes dedicated to maintenance of the church by signing an oath that they did not share the faith of the town church. The Act of Toleration thus enabled small groups to form new churches and by exempting members from the church tax, also freed up some financial resources to start a new church.³⁸

An important aspect of this broad social transformation of religion was a belief that ordinary people could and should read the *Bible*, interpret it for themselves, and use their own experi-

37. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

38. Charles B. Kinney, Jr., *Church and State: The Struggle for Separation in New Hampshire 1630–1900* (New York: Columbia University Teachers College, 1955).

ences to test moral truths. The new sects all relied heavily on mass distribution of printed materials to educate and persuade large audiences.³⁹ These changes in Protestantism were probably an underlying force behind civic efforts to spread book-learning to the broad mass of citizens. Since the private social libraries were restricted to people of means, Sabbath Schools, Sunday Schools, and Bible Societies were in some sense the earliest New England institutions for circulating books to everyone—albeit, copies of only one book, the Holy Scriptures. Churches and church-affiliated groups became a focus for intellectual discussion.

Universalism, perhaps more than any of the other new sects, was a rebellion against established church authority and a celebration of individual ability to acquire knowledge. For many of the Universalist leaders their defining experience came in a moment of seclusion and intense personal study of the *Bible*.⁴⁰ Universalist preachers roamed the New England countryside, preaching their democratic message: each person can find the way to wisdom, truth, and salvation by reading the Scriptures, consulting his own mind, and letting God lead him. Universalist teachings placed enormous value on the search for truth, and Universalists put great emphasis, therefore, on education. They formed numerous high school academies in the mid-nineteenth century, including the Green Mountain Liberal Institute in Woodstock, Vermont, where Hosea Parker studied, and they were active in promoting public libraries.

Lempster was very much caught up in the religious upheavals of the day. In the 1820s numerous men petitioned the selectmen for exemption from the town tax that went to support the Congregationalist Church and its minister, Elias Fisher.⁴¹ In 1846 sixty-four citizens of Lempster formed the Lempster Union Bible Society, whose object was “to circulate the Scriptures, with-

39. Hatch, *Democratization of Christianity*.

40. *Ibid.*, 40–43, describes five such experiences.

41. Helen Bingham, “History of Lempster,” 188; Lempster Historical Society, Box 1820–1899, contains many of these petitions.

out note or comment, among the destitute of our population; and also to aid in the more extensive circulation abroad, in our own country, and in heathen lands.”⁴²

The record book of this Lempster Union Bible Society is a notable document in the town’s history, as well as the library’s. First, the aim of circulating Bibles “without note or comment” indicates the members’ belief that every person, rich or poor, could interpret the Scriptures for him or herself and did not need to be told, by notes and comments, what the Scriptures meant and what to think about them. Second, the book lists the names of sixty-four citizens of Lempster (nineteen women among them), which at that time was about seven percent of the population. And third, this Bible Society was undoubtedly the first institution for the circulation of books to a broader public, beyond the confines of those who could afford to buy their own copies or join the social library.

According to the beautifully hand-penned record book, this society constituted itself as an auxiliary to the New Hampshire Bible Society and admitted as members “any person contributing to the funds of the Society, and signing his name to the Constitution.”⁴³ The membership dues were fifty cents a year, which entitled the member to receive a copy of the *Common Bible* once every two years. By contributing more, people could be members for life and receive Bibles every year, or even two copies a year.

A Universalist Society was formed in Lempster in 1842, but the town clearly had many earlier adherents to that faith.⁴⁴ Ben-

42. Record book of the Lempster Union Bible Society, 1846. This notebook, which also contains the records of the Lempster Saboth [sic] Society, belongs to Mr. and Mrs. Everett Thurber, Lempster.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Except where noted, information on Universalism in Lempster is from Lucy E. Smith, *History of the Universalist Society, Lempster, New Hampshire April 23, 1842–September 2, 1924* (Newport, N.H.: Maurice S. Call, printer, n.d. [probably 1924]). Booklet belongs to Mr. and Mrs. Everett Thurber, Lempster, and photocopy in Miner Memorial Library, Lempster.

jamin Parker, Hiram and Hosea's father, was a founding member of the Universalist Society, and very possibly his father, Joseph, was a Universalist as well. Benjamin's wife, Olive Nichols Parker, was also a founding member, and though her father (Timothy Nichols) was not a signer of the constitution, he did join the Universalist Society on the day of its founding.

Perhaps the family history of Alonzo Miner, for whom Lempster's library is now named, best illustrates the religious turmoil taking place in Lempster.⁴⁵ Alonzo's father, Benajah Ames Miner, was a convert to Universalism. Benajah's parents, who had come to Lempster from Connecticut in 1784, were close communion Baptists and reared their son in strict Calvinist theology. Benajah, or Ames as he was called, never believed in the religion of his parents, and at age fifteen he rebelled. Instead of going to church with his parents on Sunday mornings, he would walk six miles to an adjoining town to hear a Universalist preacher. He even took off his shoes and socks on the way—surely an act of rebellion against the Sabbath rules. Ames became a committed Universalist, and Alonzo, his son,⁴⁶ decided already as a teenager that he wanted to become a minister in the faith. Alonzo married the daughter of a staunch Methodist, Capt. Edmund S. Perley. Alonzo and Capt. Perley's daughter, Maria, attended one of the Lempster schools together, and their early courtship included some fierce debates about religion. She eventually adopted his faith and supported him fully in his life's work.

The Universalist Society was very important to the town of Lempster generally, as well as to its public library. The Society loaned the town considerable money in the 1880s and 1890s. The Society held the largest note against the town for most of those two decades, usually a note for \$1000. Since these notes were occasionally paid back and re-borrowed, they were prob-

45. George H. Emerson, *Life of Alonzo Ames Miner, S.T.D., LL.D.* (Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1896).

ably tax anticipation loans. The town borrowed from other people as well but usually much smaller amounts. The biggest individual creditor was Rebecca Dodge—she loaned \$800 in 1880—a woman who was also a member and benefactress of the Universalist Society. The Society, then, was by far the biggest financier of Lempster town government.⁴⁶

Many of the leaders in town government and education came from the Universalist faith, including, of course, at least three generations of the Parker family. Hiram and Helen, their parents, their siblings, and their children were members.⁴⁷ Hiram's uncle (his father Benjamin's brother), William Bateman Parker, was also a founding member along with his wife, who, as it turns out, was Alonzo Miner's sister Amanda. William and Amanda Parker's children became members as well. One son, Sylvester, became a minister, and another, Andrew J. Parker (who was, of course, Hiram's first cousin), was a Lempster selectman from 1881 through 1883, and again in 1887 and 1888. Many other Universalists, notably William Thissel and Charles Booth, served as selectmen and other town officers.

The Parkers were leaders within the Universalist Society as well as leaders in civic affairs. Benjamin Parker was the first president of the Society; his brother William also served as president, as did Hiram much later (1917–1919). Hiram was also the clerk of the society for forty-eight years, from 1852 to 1900, and he and his brother Hosea frequently led services. Hosea served as the superintendent of Universalist Sunday Schools in Clare-

46. Loans to the town are found in the "Notes Against Town" section of annual town reports; town repayments are listed under "Notes taken up and indorsements." Rebecca Dodge's gift to the Universalist Society is described in the preface to Lucy E. Smith, *History of the Universalist Society, Lempster*. There are no town reports prior to 1878; however, Smith records that in 1865, "William B. Parker was chosen to hold the note against the town of Lempster, N.H.," 11.

47. Lucy Smith's *History of the Universalist Society* includes a list of members and dates they joined.

mont for over fifty years and as the president of the State and General Universalist Conventions.⁴⁸

While we know that Universalists were active in establishing schools and libraries in other New England towns, there is very little evidence about library activity in Lempster, save for the Parker family connection. Nevertheless, members of the Universalist Society were also the backbone of the Lempster Free Public Library. Among the many people who served as library trustees, three stand out as having served for more than a decade and probably having done much of the day-to-day work to keep the library going and develop its collection. All three were Universalists: Elbert Hurd was a trustee from 1900 through 1910, Carl Parker from 1907 through 1918, and Herbert B. Nichols from 1920 through 1938 and again from 1940 through 1948.⁴⁹

Through William and Amanda Parker, the Society probably kept in close contact with the Second Universalist Society of Boston, where Amanda's brother, Alonzo Miner, was the pastor from 1848 to 1891. In 1894 the first librarian's report (the librarian was Hiram's younger son, Carl) noted, "There have been forty-nine books given to the library, most of them from the Unitarian Association of Boston."⁵⁰ (The Unitarians and Universalists often worked and worshiped together in the hundred years before they formally merged in 1960.) Probably Carl or one of the other trustees, knowing of the Unitarian effort to distribute its publications, sent away for the books. Curiously, Carl's report did not mention the gift of books from the state.

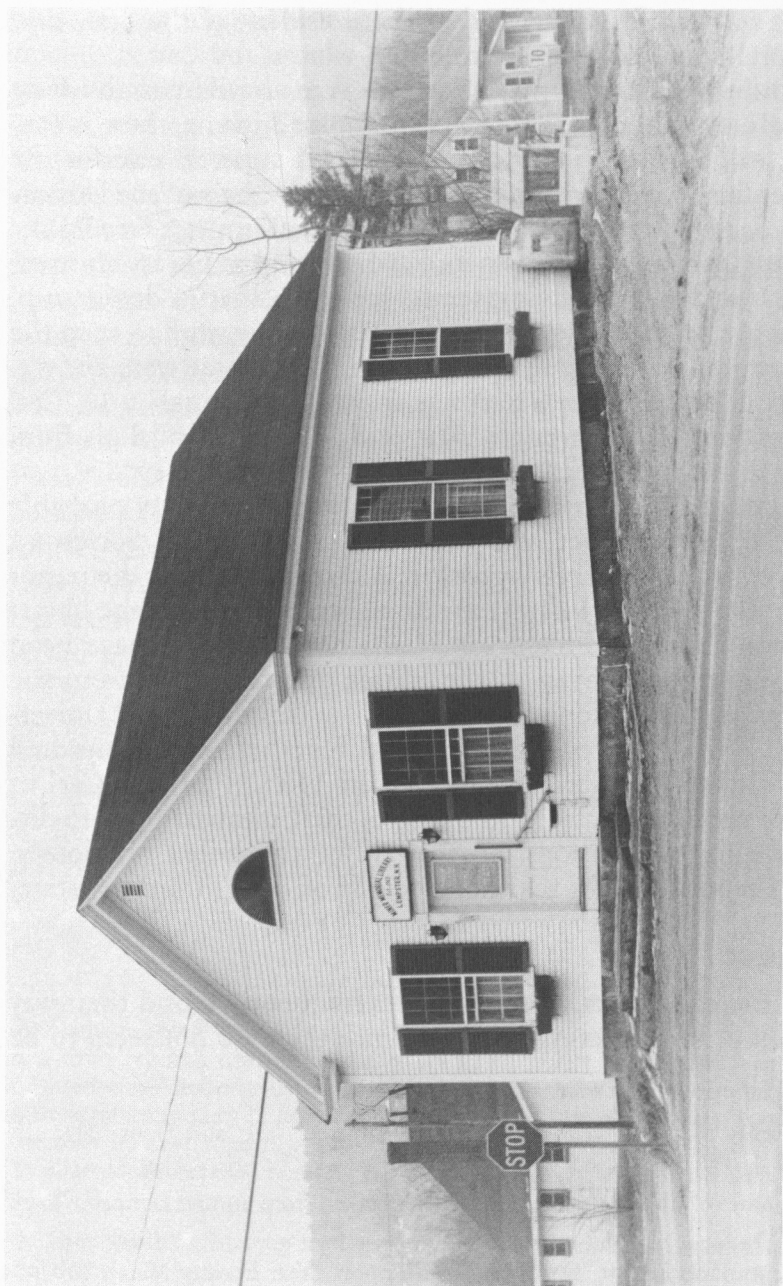
Epilogue

In the early years, library matters frequently found their way onto the town meeting warrant. Since there do not seem to be

48. Henry Metcalf, "Glimpses of Old Lempster," 251; and Henry Metcalf, "Hon. Hosea Parker," 478.

49. Names of library trustees for each year taken from annual Lempster Town Reports.

50. Librarian's Report, Lempster Town Report, Year Ending March 1894.



Miner Memorial Library (formerly the Universalist Chapel). Photograph by author.

any minutes of town meetings in the Lempster archives, it is impossible to tell if warrant articles passed. But it is still noteworthy that the library generated sufficient interest to put matters to a vote at town meeting. In 1894 there was an article to remove "such books as may be of interest to the public" from the town clerk's office and place them in the library. In 1898 a long and detailed article called for amending the rules for taking books from the library "in favor of those living in remote parts." People living more than two miles from the library, the article proposed, should be able to borrow for six weeks instead of three and should not have to pay late fines if the due day "shall prove stormy" or "in winter if the roads are blockaded by snowdrifts or the weather extremely inclement."⁵¹

The library moved to its current home in 1965. The building that now houses the Miner Memorial Library was originally the Universalist Chapel. The story of how this building came to be is connected to the religious upheaval described earlier.

Membership in the town's Congregational Church began a steep decline around 1830, from over two hundred people in 1831, to eighty-five in 1856, to a time in later years when "there have been practically neither pastor nor people."⁵² In 1837 a group split off from the Congregational Church on Lempster Street and organized itself as the Second Congregational Church.⁵³ The split was apparently triggered by a disagreement over the building that the First Congregational Church had erected on Lempster Street, near the town hall.⁵⁴ The decline in participation in the Congregational Church was also caused by competition from other sects, especially the Methodists and the Universalists.

51. Warrant for Town Meeting, Nov. 6, 1894 (a biennial election year), article 2; and Warrant for Town Meeting, March 8, 1898, article 9; both warrants in Lempster Historical Society archives, Box 1890-1899.

52. Henry Metcalf, "Lempster's 150th Anniversary," 188.

53. Record book of the Congregational Church, 1837-1861, Lempster Historical Society. Entry for January 31, 1837.

54. Helen Bingham, "History of Lempster," 188.

All of these groups wanted to obtain a church building in East Lempster since that had become the growing section of town. Despite the sectarian disagreements over matters of theology, there was apparently a good deal of cooperation among the Second Congregational Church, the Methodists, and the Universalists. Together, they built a new church in East Lempster shortly after 1835.⁵⁵ (This building is still the Methodist Church in East Lempster.)

Perhaps the Universalists were uncomfortable sharing a place of worship, or perhaps by the early 1840s there were enough of them to support their own building. One of the first items of business after the founding of the Universalist Society in 1842 was organizing a subscription to pay for a new building. A building committee was formed in June 1842, on which sat William Bateman Parker. At the next meeting a month later, another committee was formed "to draft a Constitution, to regulate the building of a Meeting House, and to solicit funds from members of the society."⁵⁶ William Parker and Benajah Ames Miner (Alonzo's father) were two of the four members. By 1845 the meeting house had been built and paid for by a subscription of \$500.00. In contrast to the town's first church, the Universalist meeting house had simple wooden benches, called "settees," instead of pews. Four of these are still in the library today.

In 1964 the Universalist Society disbanded and deeded its chapel to the town for use as a library. The next year, in 1965, the town voted to name its library "Miner Memorial Library." During 1965 much work was done to fit out the chapel as a library: a new chimney was built and a gas heating system installed; book stacks were built and stained; the floor was stained and sanded, the windows repaired and painted, and the ceiling was repaired. The library is still operating today in this same building, where Hiram Parker's funeral service was held in 1925.

Lempster is a town that never had the resources to create and

55. *Ibid.*, 189.

56. Lucy E. Smith, *History of the Universalist Society of Lempster*, 1.

sustain a public library. The idea of mounting a public library today would probably be deemed unthinkable. Were it not for the conjunction of a social movement, a state program, a Protestant liberalization, and a Universalist family, this small-town library would never have come to pass.

A history of the Lempster public library's origins is really at least three intersecting stories. The more-or-less official story, the one that emerges from public documents like town reports, town warrants, and state agency reports, is a tale of a Progressive-era public movement that culminated in state legislation that, in turn, stimulated town action. A more biographical origin story emerges from reading town history, piecing together genealogies, and listening to the voices of individual citizens. This story finds the library's beginnings in enlightened leadership by a family deeply committed to public education and dedicated to improving the community life of their town. Finally, a broad sociocultural story emerges from a blending of the history of American religion with the written records of Lempster religious institutions. In this tale, conflicts and changes in the intellectual life of New England communities, mostly conducted through churches and affiliated organizations, brought public education and mass distribution of books into the implicit definition of what a good town should be and do.

Appendix

List of Books Given to New Libraries by the Board of Library Commissioners in 1892

A. ARTS

- Felch, I. K. — Poultry culture
Henderson, Peter — Garden and farm topics
 Gardening for profit
 How the farm pays
 Practical floriculture
Johnson, S. W. — How crops grow
Marvin, Charles — Training the trotting horse
Morris, E. — Farming for boys
Roe, E. P. — Play and profit in my garden
 Success with small fruits
 The home acre
Stewart, Henry — The dairyman's manual
 The shepherd's manual

B. BIOGRAPHY

- Abbott, J. S. C. — Life of Columbus
 Life of Miles Standish
 Life of Daniel Boone
 Life of De Soto
 Life of La Salle
 Life of Captain Kidd
 Life of Peter Stuyvesant
 Life of Kit Carson
 Life of Paul Jones
 Life of David Crockett
Bolton, Sarah K. — Famous American statesmen
 Famous English statesmen
 Famous American authors
 Famous English authors
 Famous European artists
 Girls who became famous
 Poor boys who became famous
Bourrienne, Louis — Life of Napoleon. 4 vols.

Chambliss, J. E. — Livingstone and Stanley
Franklin, Benjamin — Autobiography
Hill, George C. — Life of Israel Putnam
 Life of Capt. John Smith
Hosmer, J. K. — Life of Samuel Adams
Irving and Fiske — Washington and his country
Lodge, H. C. — Life of Daniel Webster
Stoddard, W. O. — Life of Abraham Lincoln

D. DRAMA AND POETRY

Carleton, Will — Farm ballads
Longfellow, H. W. — Poems
Lowell, J. R. — Poems
Shakespeare, William — Plays and poems
Tennyson, Alfred — Poems
Whittier, J. G. — Poems

E. FICTION

Aldrich, T. B. — Marjorie Daw and other people
 Prudence Palfrey
Austin, Jane G. — Betty Alden
 Standish of Standish
Bulwer Lytton — Last days of Pompeii
Clemens, S. L. — Roughing it
Cooper, J. F. — Deerslayer
 Last of the Mohicans
 Pathfinder
 Pioneers
 Prairie
Craik, Dinah M. — John Halifax, Gentleman
Cummins, Maria — The lamplighter
Dana, R. H. — Two years before the mast
Dickens, Charles — David Copperfield
Eggleston, Edward — Hoosier schoolmaster
 The Graysons
 The end of the world
Eliot, George (Mrs. Cross) — Adam Bede
Hale, E. E. — In His name

- Hardy, A. S. — But yet a woman
Hawthorne, N. — Scarlet letter
Holland, J. G. — Sevenoaks
 Arthur Bonnicastle
Holley, Marietta — Samantha at the centennial
Holmes, O. W. — Elsie Venner
Howard, Blanche W. — One summer
Howells, W. D. — Rise of Silas Lapham
 Their wedding journey
Irving, Washington — Sketch book
Jackson, Helen H. — Ramona
Jewett, Sarah O. — Deeplaven
King, Charles — Between the lines
 The Colonel's daughter
 Marion's faith
Roe, E. P. — A young girl's wooing
 Driven back to Eden
 From jest to earnest
 Opening of a chestnut burr
Scott, Walter — Ivanhoe
Sewell, Anna — Black Beauty
Simms, W. G. — The partisan
 Mellichampe
Stowe, Harriet B. — Uncle Tom's cabin
 The minister's wooing
Trowbridge, J. T. — Cudjo's cave
 Neighbor Jackwood
 The three scouts
 The drummer boy
Wallace, Lew — Ben Hur
Whitney, Mrs. A. D. T. — Faith Gartney's girlhood
 The Gayworthys
Wilkins, Mary E. — A humble romance, and other stories

H. HISTORY

- Abbot, W. J. — Blue Jackets of '76
 Blue Jackets of 1812
 Blue Jackets of '61
Baldwin, J. D. — Ancient America

- Coffin, C. C. — Old times in the colonies
Boys of '76
Building the nation
Drum-beat of the nation
Marching to victory
Redeeming the republic
Freedom triumphant
- Creasy, E. S. — Fifteen decisive battles of the world
- Drake, S. A. — Making of the great West
Making of New England
New England legends and folklore
Nooks and corners of the N. E. coast
- Drake, F. S. — Indian history for young folks
- Fisher, George P. — Outlines of universal history
- Goss, W. L. — Recollections of a private
- Grant, U. S. — Personal memoirs, 2 vols.
- Green, J. R. — A short history of the English people
- Livermore, Mary A. — My story of the war
- Parkman, Francis — Montcalm and Wolfe, 2 vols.
Conspiracy of Pontiac, 2 vols.
- Poore, Ben: Perley — Perley's reminiscences
- Prescott, W. H. — Conquest of Peru
Conquest of Mexico
- Ridpath, J. C. — A popular history of the U.S.
- Williams, George F. — Bullet and shell
- Yonge, Charlotte — Young folks' history of France
Young folks' history of Germany
Young folks' history of Greece
Young folks' history of Rome

J. JUVENILE FICTION

- Alcott, Louisa M. — Little men
Jo's boys
Little women
- Burnett, F. H. — Little Lord Fauntleroy
- Butterworth, H. — Zigzag journeys in classic lands
- Clark, H. H. — Boy life in the U.S. navy
Joe Bentley

- Coffin, C. C. — Winning his way
DeFoe, Daniel — Robinson Crusoe
Goss, W. L. — Jed: A boy's adventures in the army
Tom Clifton
Irving, Fannie B. — Six girls
Jewett, Sarah O. — Betty Leicester
Knox, Thomas W. — Boy travelers in Japan and China
Larcom, Lucy — A New England girlhood
Lothrop, Harriet M. — Five little Peppers and how they grew
Five little Peppers midway
Five little Peppers grown up
Talbot, C. R. — Honor Bright
Royal Lowrie
Royal Lowrie's last year at St. Olaves
Townsend, Virginia F. — Six in all
The mills of Tuxbury
Trowbridge, J. T. — Silver medal stories, 6 vols.
Start in life series, 4 vols.
Tide mill stories, 6 vols.
Jack Hazard series, 6 vols.

M. MISCELLANEOUS

- Emerson, R. W. — Essays: first and second series
Holmes, O. W. — Autocrat of the breakfast table
Matthews, William — Getting on in the world

R. REFERENCE

- Webster, Noah — International dictionary

S. SCIENCE

- Bamford, Mary E. — Up and down the brooks
Burroughs, John — Wake-robin
Electricity in daily life
Fisher, Arabella B. — Fairy-land of science
Hook, Stella L. — Little people in meadows, woods, and waters
Hopkins, George M. — Experimental science
Ingersoll, Ernest — Country cousins: short studies in the
natural history of the United States
Kent, Charles — Modern seven wonders of the world

- Langley, S. P. — The new astronomy
Miller, Olive T. — Bird-ways
 In nesting time
 Brothers of the air
 Little folks in feathers and fur
 Queer pets at Marcy's
Proctor, R. A. — Other worlds than ours
Richards, Laura E. — Four feet, two feet, and no feet
Wood, J. G. — Illustrated natural history
 Homes without hands

V. VOYAGES, TRAVELS, AND RESEARCHES

- Ballou, M. M. — A summer journey to Alaska
Bishop, Isabella L. — Lady's life in the Rocky Mountains
 Six months in the Sandwich Islands
Blouet, Paul — Jonathan and his continent
Brassey, Lady Anne — Around the world in the yacht "Sunbeam"
Clemens, S. L. — Innocents abroad
Custer, Elizabeth B. — Boots and saddles
Edwards, Amelia B. — A thousand miles up the Nile
Guild, Curtis — Over the ocean
Hale, E. E. and Susan — A family flight around home
Kennan, George — Siberia and the exile system
 Tent life in Siberia
M'Collester, S. H. — Round the globe
Nourse, J. E. — American explorations in the ice zones
Smith, Helen A. — Great cities of the ancient world
 Great cities of the modern world
Stanley, H. M. — Through the dark continent, 2 vols.
Thaxter, Celia — Among the Isles of Shoals
Wilson, E. L. — In scripture lands