

Staff Photo by Tom Spain

Main reading room of the Charleston Library Society.

Library Society Has Prospered As Center Of Intellectual Life

By JACK LELAND
Post-Courier Reporter

Since 1748, the Charleston Library Society has survived as a cultural facility despite early ebullience of its founders and the ravages of wars, tornadoes, earthquakes and fires.

In terms of antiquity, the society is 16 years younger than Philadelphia's Library Society but it is the elder Southern library society and it founded the Charleston Museum, the oldest in the nation. The society also was largely responsible for the establishment of the College of Charleston, which was chartered in 1785.

From the beginning, the society was beset with problems. Colonial Gov. James Glenn, giving no reason, denied the society a charter when it was ap-

Do You Know Your Charleston?

plied for in 1751, a decade after the society was founded. The British government in London refused to override Glenn's veto but, shortly thereafter, Glenn reversed himself and the charter was granted.

However, England and France were embroiled in the Seven Years' War and the French captured the Charleston-bound ship bearing the charter. A copy of the charter didn't arrive until 1757.

The next governor, William Henry Lyttleton, espoused the cause, joined the society and was quickly elected president.

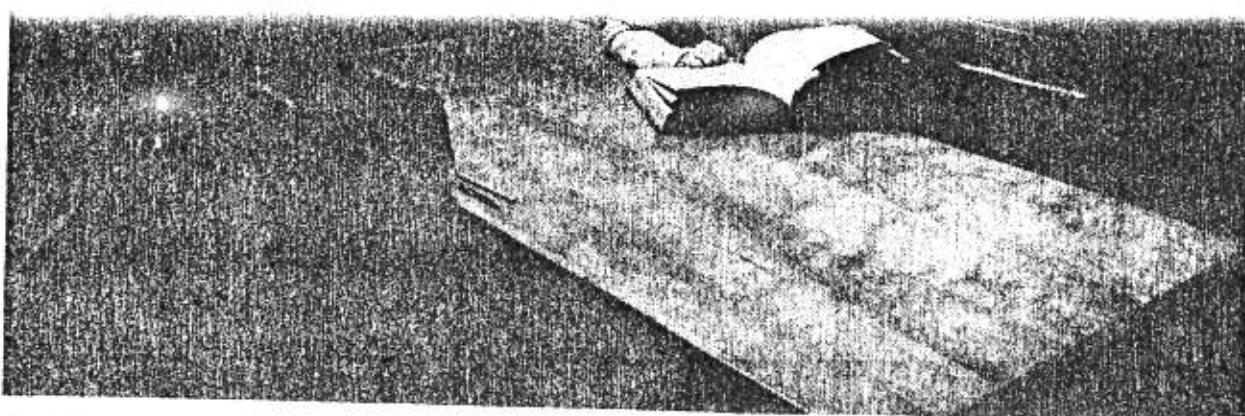
The society was established by 19 Lowcountry men — 11 merchants, two planters, two lawyers, one physician, one schoolmaster, one periuke (wig) maker and one printer — about as cosmopolitan an assembly as could be found in Charleston at the time.

One of their first problems concerned the group's meetings, which usually were held at taverns. Apparently they were great eaters and imbibers and, for a while, serious-minded people questioned the validity of their claims for becoming

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Assistant Librarian Terry Wilson examines rare book in Ross Room.

...Library Society One Of Nation's Oldest

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a "Library Society."

The society's rules and regulations were published in 1750 and an invitation was extended to "every lover of his country, every well-wisher to prosperity" to become members. That democratic philosophy is retained today and the society still depends largely on membership fees for existence.

During its earlier years, the society had no permanent home, the books being kept either at the home or the offices of the successive librarians. In 1764, Gabriel Manigault, who had been vice president for several years, fitted up the rooms of a small building he owned on upper State Street and allowed the society to use it for 21 years. By the Revolutionary War, a considerable library had been assembled and, when the great fire of 1778 destroyed the Manigault building, only a few of the 6,000-7,000 volumes were saved. Also lost were several pieces of scientific equipment stored there.

However, the society regrouped in 1783 and by 1836 was able to buy the brick building at the northwest corner of Church and Broad streets, a site it maintained until the present building at 164 King St. was constructed in 1914. In 1848, when the famous Charleston lawyer and Unionist James L. Petigru made the centennial oration, he announced the society had more than 25,000 volumes.

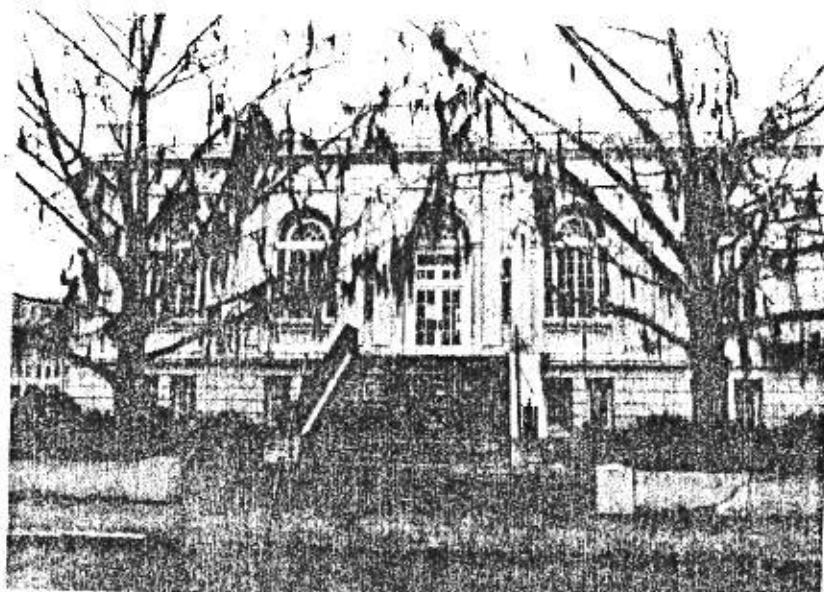
The minutes record that, during the War of 1812, London booksellers kept sending books and gave the society a line of credit because the currency of the United States at that time was in question in Great Britain.

As early as 1759, the society began making plans for carrying out its second objective as stated in the original bylaws: "raising a fund for an Academy of Charles Town, South Carolina."

Because of the society's appeals, a number of sizeable donations were obtained for the establishment of a college. The advent of the Revolutionary War interrupted that activity, but the society's efforts came to fruition in 1785 when the S.C. General Assembly authorized establishment of three colleges, one at Charleston.

The others did not survive long but the "Trustees of the College of Charleston," the name under which it was chartered, was successful. In 1839 it went under the aegis of the city of Charleston, becoming the first municipal college in the nation. It reverted to private status after World War II and on July 1, 1970, became part of the State Higher Education System.

At the turn of this century, the Society's trustees began debating con-



Staff Photo by Tom Spain

Charleston Library Society at 164 King St.

struction of a fireproof building. One of the locations proposed was the northeast corner of Meeting and Tradd streets, a site referred to in the reports as the "Boyd Lot." It was then, and is now, occupied by the Dr. Horry House, one of Charleston's most beautiful residences. The record does not show whether the society planned to demolish the house. However, since it planned a fireproof building, obviously it would have meant destroying the house on the lot.

Finally, the 164 King St. site prevailed and, since 1914, the society has acquired adjacent buildings and uses them in its various programs.

The society has what is regarded as the best collection of South Carolina newspapers in existence. This includes South Carolina's first newspaper, the Gazette, which was published in 1732-34.

The society's book fund received considerable assistance by two major gifts. When the Charleston Jockey Club disbanded in 1900, it donated its property to the society. The will of Dr. John L. Dawson, recorded in 1920, gave the society some \$47,000 in 1931.

In 1874, the Apprentice Library merged with the Library Society, making it the only public library in Charleston, a situation that prevailed until the Charleston County Free Library was founded Jan. 1, 1931.

The society is regarded as a prime source for researchers interested in Charlestoniana and South Caroliniana. It also has an extensive collection of fiction and poetry.

Among its treasures are an 11th-century Persian manuscript, a 15th-

century manuscript of Horace, a second folio Shakespeare, rare incunabulum and Bibles, a second folio Shakespeare, a folio edition of Audubon's Birds, Bachman's and Audubon's Quadrupeds, Catesby's Carolina, Holbrook's Herpetology and Ichthyology, fine editions of Hogarth and of Piranesi's Antiquities of Rome, Napoleon's Egypt, Atlantic Neptune and rare books on architecture.

In addition to the complete collection of South Carolina newspapers dating from 1932, the Library Society has early almanacs, directories, maps, manuscripts and autographed letters of state leaders.

Membership in the society is open to the public and applications for membership may be made through the librarian. The applications are acted on at each meeting of the board and John E. Gibbs, a member and past president, said he could not recall anyone ever being denied membership.