

Books, Bartrams, and Burglars: Darby Library Company

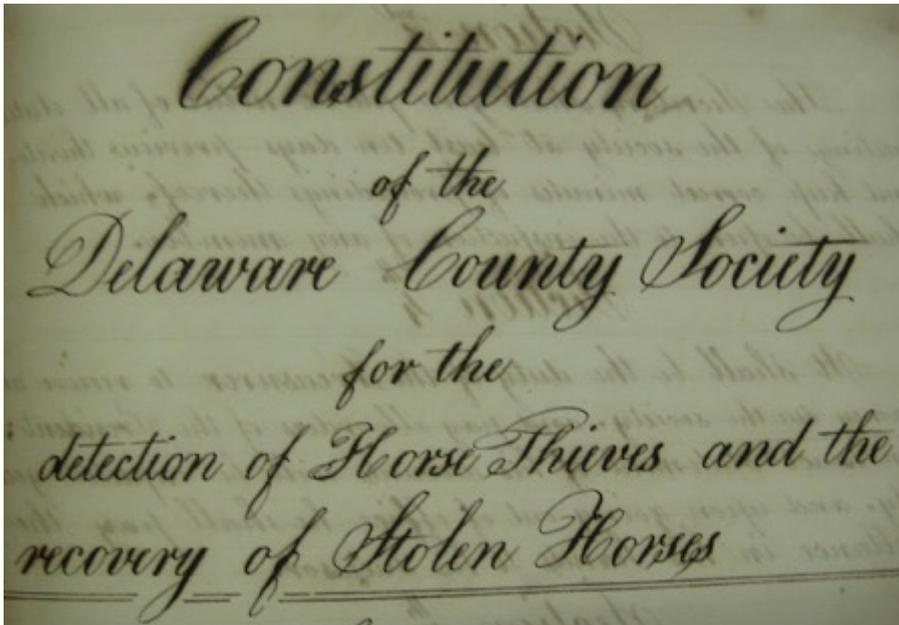
Darby Library Company was founded in 1743, a subscription library open to any paying subscriber (although not gratis to the public). The original twenty-nine subscribers authorized the purchase of forty-five volumes at a cost of 11 Pounds, 10 Shillings, Sterling. The list of titles - a few of which are visible in the image at the top of this post - reveals the values and aspirations of the subscribers. Alongside the Enlightenment-inspired focus on education and self-improvement, the Society of Friends (Quaker) members selected Robert Barclay's An Apology for the True Christian Divinity [1]. There's no fiction to be found on this list!

I was delighted to learn that the man who arranged for purchasing the 45 books on the list from London was none other than John Bartram (1699-1777). The "Father of American Botany," Bartram created a botanic garden in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania that is widely considered the first true botanic collection in North America (and that still exists as an historic site with archival collections that my colleague and I surveyed [2] several years ago). John Bartram's son, William, was also a noted botanist, and also retained close ties to Darby Library Company. In fact, William Bartram donated his personal copy of his book, Travels through North & South Carolina [3] to the library. The 1791 author's copy is unique, featuring several extra engravings.



Franklinia alatamaha [a tree William Bartram discovered]

While digging through the records of the Darby Library Company, I was surprised to stumble across documents from the "Delaware County Society for the Detection of Horse Thieves and the Recovery of Stolen Horses." It turns out, strangely enough, the Society was absorbed into the Darby Library Company around the turn of the 20th century.



I've written previously ^[4] about horse protective associations of this type, whose records are cached at various repositories across the five-county Philadelphia area. Proliferating in the early 19th century, the horse protective associations generally functioned as mutual aid societies, where subscribers worked together whenever a horse was reported missing to apprehend the thief, turn him over to the authorities, and return the horse to its rightful owner. A few such associations still exist - as social clubs, not active vigilante groups - including the Newtown Reliance Company for the Detecting and Apprehending of Horse Thieves and Other Villains ^[5] and the Lower Merion Society for the Detection and Prosecution of Horse Thieves and the Recovery of Stolen Horses ^[6].



In 1898, the Darby Library Company became public in the modern sense of the word, when it became free and open to all local residents as a condition of receiving a 1,000 book donation from Richard Cook. In 1981, it became a member of the newly-formed Delaware County Library System. The Darby Free Library remains operational as of 2014.

The Darby Library Company's archives are extensive, with Board of Directors and stockholders' minute books, book acquisition and circulation records, financial records, other administrative papers, and various other materials from the Darby Free Library and the Delaware County Society for the Detection of Horse Thieves and the Recovery of Stolen Horses. So whether you're interested in books, Bartrams, or burglars, you'll want to "check out" the Darby Library Company!

Links

- [1] <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008963609>
- [2] <http://hsp.org/blogs/archival-adventures-in-small-repositories/bartrams-garden>
- [3] <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/010944097>
- [4] <http://hsp.org/blogs/archival-adventures-in-small-repositories/horse-thieves-in-newtown>
- [5] <http://newtownreliance.org/>
- [6] <http://lowermerionhistory.org/web/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/horse-thieves.pdf>