Summary

Creator: Astor Library

Title: Astor Library records

Date: 1839-1911

Source: NN, NN, OCoLC

Abstract: NYPL Archives Record Group 1 consists of the records of the Astor Library, a non-circulating reference library established in 1849 by the terms of the will of John Jacob Astor. In 1895 the Astor Library was consolidated with the Lenox Library and the Tilden Trust to form The New York Public Library.

Conditions Governing Access:

Advance permission is required to access Board of Trustees minutes.

Volumes 8 and 10 are closed to research for preservation reasons. Readers may use photocopies of these items identified as Volumes 9 and 11.

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Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Compiled by Robert Sink; machine-readable finding aid created by Jim Moske.

Creator History

The Astor Library was founded as a private reference library, open free to the public, according to the terms of the will of John Jacob Astor (1763-1848). Joseph Green Cogswell (1786-1871), teacher and
librarian, had originally urged Astor to fund a free library. As a result, Astor bequeathed $400,000 for such an effort and in the meantime hired Cogswell to purchase books and to plan for the future library.

The Astor Library was incorporated by an act of the New York State Legislature on January 18, 1849. The act of incorporation fixed the number of Astor Library trustees at eleven. The original trustees were Washington Irving, William Backhouse Astor, Daniel Lord, Jr., James G. King, Joseph Green Cogswell, Fitz-Greene Halleck, Samuel B. Ruggles, Samuel Ward, Jr., Charles Astor Bristed, John Adams Dix (who replaced Henry Brevoort, Jr., who died in 1848) and the Mayor of the City of New York.

The following served as President of the Astor Library: Washington Irving (1849-1859), William B. Astor (1860-1875), Alexander Hamilton (1876-1889), Hamilton Fish (Acting, 1890-1891), Thomas M. Markoe (1891-1895). The following served as Treasurer: William B. Astor (1849), Daniel Lord, Jr. (1849-1868), John Jacob Astor (1868-1890), S.V.R. Cruger (1890), Edward King (1890-1895).

The Astor Library was directed by its Superintendent and Librarian. Joseph Cogswell was chosen as the first Superintendent of the Astor Library by the Trustees in 1848 and served until 1861. Cogswell's successors as Superintendent were Francis Schroeder (1861-1871), Dr. Edward Richard Straznicky (1871-1876), J. Carson Brevoort (1876-1878) and Robbins Little (1878-1896). Beginning in 1858, the Superintendent was assisted by a Librarian, Frederick Saunders, who served until 1896.

Cogswell made his first purchase for John Jacob Astor in 1839 at the auction of the library of Major D.B. Douglass. When the Astor Library opened to the public in 1854, the collection had grown to 80,000 volumes purchased by Cogswell in the United States and abroad, through book dealers and at auction. By 1890, the Astor held over 260,000 volumes, making it the largest reference library in the New York metropolitan area.

From 1849 to 1853, the Astor library had temporary quarters at 32 Bond Street. The Astor Library building, designed by Alexander Saelzer and located on Astor land on Lafayette Place in lower Manhattan, opened to the public in 1854. At that time, the shelves were at almost full capacity with 80,000 volumes. An extension added to the north opened in 1859. This North Building or Hall accommodated books and readers in history and literature. Books and readers in science and the industrial arts remained in the original building, referred to as the South Building or Hall.

In 1881 a second extension, adjacent to the North, was opened, and this more than doubled the capacity of the Library to a potential 400,000 volumes. The main entrance to the Library moved from the South Hall to the Middle Hall (formerly the North Hall) which was altered to hold the catalog and exhibits as well as administrative and book-storage space. The new North Hall and the South Hall both housed large reading rooms and books.

The Astor Library was open to the public during the day on weekdays and Saturdays. Most readers reported to a main desk to request books which were then paged from the shelves. Some readers, usually scholars, were granted the privilege of being alcove readers, and they had full access to alcoves of books devoted to specific topics.

As an institution funded by a single family, the Astor Library faced financial difficulties from its beginning. In 1894, it entered into talks to consolidate with the Tilden Trust. On May 23, 1895 the trustees of the Astor and Lenox Libraries and the Tilden Trust reached an agreement to consolidate and establish The New York Public Library.

Although the Astor Library ceased to exist as a separate entity, the Astor Building continued to serve readers while the NYPL Central Building was planned and constructed. Beginning in 1895, the library
was opened on Sundays and during the summer. In 1899, in a further effort toward democratization, alcove readers privileges were revoked, and all readers had to apply at the desk for books. In 1905, evening hours were added. Soon after consolidation, books were transferred between the Astor and Lenox buildings, with the Astor Building housing general literature, scientific books and serials, and duplicates. Robbins Little and Frederick Saunders retired, and NYPL Director John Shaw Billings served as head of the Astor with his office there.

The Astor Library building finally closed to readers on April 15, 1911, shortly before the opening of the new Central Building on Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street.

**Scope and Content Note**

The Astor Library records span the years 1839-1911, with the bulk dating from the period 1870-1890. They consist of handwritten, typed, and printed documents. The records are arranged in four series: I. Administration, II. Collections, III. Readers, IV. Finance. Each series is further divided by administrative function and type of record.

Administration records include correspondence, annual reports, notebooks, and historical material pertaining to the Astor Library. Materials in the Collections series include acquisition records, book orders, catalogs, periodicals registers and want lists. Finance records consist of correspondence, statements, checks, bank books, and similar fiscal documents. Readers records include registers of library users with statistics on books consulted and subject lists.

**Arrangement:** Arranged in four series: I. Administration, 1839-1904; II. Collections, 1849-1896; III. Readers, 1859-1911; IV. Finance, 1848-1896

**Key Terms**

**Subjects**

Acquisitions (Libraries) -- New York (State) -- New York
Classification -- Books
Libraries -- History -- 19th century
Libraries -- New York (State) -- New York
Library catalogs
Library circulation and loans
Library finance
Research libraries -- Acquisitions
Research libraries -- New York (State) -- New York

**Genre/Physical Characteristic**

Annual reports
Bankbooks
Cashbooks
Catalogs
Charters
Financial records
Ledgers
Minutes
Registers
Scrapbooks
Names
Astor Library
Astor, John Jacob, 1763-1848
Cogswell, Joseph Green
Irving, Washington, 1783-1859
Saelzer, Alexander
Saunders, Frederick, 1807-1902
New York Public Library
Container List

Series I. Administration 1839-1904 (20 linear feet)

This series includes the 1849 pamphlet text of the Astor incorporation act and an 1890 reprint with the Library's by-law, rules, and regulations. Also included are printed annual reports issued by the Library from its incorporation to its consolidation with the Lenox Library and the Tilden Trust. There are multiple copies for some years. Correspondence consists of General Correspondence and Saunders' Letter Copybooks. General Correspondence is sorted by year and includes incoming letters and mail, invoices, clippings and related papers. There is no correspondence for the years 1843-1847, and 1866. Saunders' Letter Copybooks contain transfer-process copies of Saunders' outgoing correspondence. There are no letter copybooks for his early years at the Astor. Lists for Distributions of Annual Reports give the names of institutions and individuals to whom annual reports were mailed. There are lists for 1870-1880, 1882, 1886, 1888, and 1894, as well as one undated list. The Stock Account Book gives stock counts of the printed Astor Library catalog and lists the names of institutions purchasing it. The 1886 and 1888 Lists for Distributions of Annual Reports include stock accounts of the 1886-1888 new Nelson catalog. Saunders' Notebooks are his memo books containing notations of daily tasks. Historical Material comprises scrapbook albums on the Astor Library's history compiled by Saunders and an essay by Albert F.W. Kern reprinted from German American Annals, "Johan Jakob Astor und die Astor Bibliothek."

b. 1 Charter, By-Laws, Rules, and Regulations 1849, 1890

v. 1 Annual Reports 1849-1895

b. 2-3 Annual Reports 1849-1895

Loose copies and duplicates.

r. 1 Board of Trustees Minutes 1848-1895

Correspondence

b. 4 General 1839-1842, 1848-1851
b. 5 General 1852-1854
b. 6 General 1855-1857
b. 7 General 1858-1861
b. 8 General 1862-1863
b. 9 General 1864-1866
b. 10 General 1866-1867
b. 11 General 1868-1869
b. 12 General 1870-1871
b. 13 General 1872
b. 14-15 General 1873
b. 16-17 General 1874
b. 18-19 General 1875
b. 20-21 General 1876
b. 22-23 General 1877
b. 24 General 1878
b. 25 General 1879
b. 26 General 1880
b. 27 General 1881
b. 28 General 1882
b. 29-30 General 1883
b. 31-32 General 1884
### Guide to the Astor Library records

**Series I. Administration (cont.)**

| b. 33-34 | General 1885 |
| b. 35-36 | General 1886 |
| b. 37 | General 1887-1888 |
| b. 38 | General 1888 |
| b. 39 | General 1889-1891 |
| b. 40 | General 1892-94 |
| b. 41 | General 1895 |
| b. 42 | General 1896 |
| b. 43 | General 1897 |
| b. 44 | General 1898-1899 |
| b. 45 | General n.d. |
| b. 46 | Saunders' Letter Copy Books 1875-1896 |

**Series II. Collections 1849-1896 (11 linear feet)**

The series consists of records pertaining to the Astor Library collections and includes various lists and catalogs. It is divided into five subseries: A. Acquisitions (1849-1895), B. Catalogs (1854-1886), C. Periodicals (1855-1895), D. Pamphlets (1866-1911), E. Unsorted Volumes (1876-1910).

Note that some records related to acquisitions and catalogs may be found in the Unsorted Volumes subseries. Some records pertaining particularly to the maintenance of books in the collections may be found in the Periodicals subseries.

#### A. Acquisitions 1849-1895

Accession Records are volumes giving the accession numbers, titles, formats, and dates of books coming into the Astor Library collection. Donations to the Astor Library are manuscript volumes that list titles donated to the library alphabetically by donor. There are no records of donations for the years 1864, 1875, and 1877 to 1880. Book Orders entries are arranged by order date and vendor. The Record of Books Added is a chronological list of volumes acquired by the Library. The cost of the book is included if it was not a donation. New Books list acquisitions in subject order.

| v. 12 | Accession Records 1878-1880 |
| v. 13 | Accession Records 1880-1883 |
| v. 14 | Accession Records 1881-1883 |
| v. 15 | Accession Records 1883-1884 |
| v. 16 | Accession Records 1884-1886 |
| v. 17 | Accession Records 1886-1889 |
| v. 18 | Accession Records 1890-1892 |
| v. 19 | Accession Records 1892-1893 |
Before the Astor Library opened in 1854, Cogswell had already put together a catalog of books acquired and desired, An Alphabetical Index to the Astor Library; or, Catalogue with Short Titles, of the Books Now Collected and of the Proposed Accessions, asSubmitted to the Trustees for Their Approval, printed in 1851. This list included shelfmarks for the books, assigned according to the fixed-location classification scheme employed by the Astor for its entire period of operation.

A variety of catalogs, printed and handwritten, on slips and in volumes, alphabetical and classed, followed the 1851 list. Most notable among these are: Cogswell's classed catalog, listing books under fourteen main subjects, which was begun in 1854 and was never completed; the four-volume Catalogue or Alphabetical Index of the Astor Library, compiled by Cogswell and published in 1861; Cogswell's Supplement, of 1866; and Charles Alexander Nelson's four-volume Continuation (Accessions to 1880) Catalogue of the Astor Library, published by the Riverside Press, 1886-1888. For a more detailed history of the Astor Library's catalogs, see Wyllis E. Wright, "History of the Catalogues," in A Guide to the Reference Collections of the New York Public Library (New York: New York Public Library, 1941).

The Classed Catalogue comprises the manuscript notebooks of Cogswell for this never-completed finding aid, with additions made by other Astor staff. Sample Entries from the Card Catalogue are actual cards from the catalog mounted into scrapbooks. Catalogues of Additions are interim manuscript catalogs that list bibliographic entries alphabetically by author, along with shelfmarks for the books. The two volumes for the years up to 1886 only cover authors A-E and M-P. The List of Books not on the Printed Index is a manuscript supplement, probably to the 1861 index. The Record of Shelf Changes gives old and new shelfmarks for books, the locations of which were changed in 1876 and 1877.
Series II. Collections (cont.)

B. Catalogs (cont.)

Classed Catalog (cont.)

v. 46  Classed catalog 16: Astronomy and Optics
v. 47  Classed catalog 17: Hydraulics, Mechanics, and Military Works
v. 48  Classed catalog 18: Fine Arts-Painting, Sculpture, and Music
v. 49  Classed catalog 19: Architecture, A - R
v. 50  Classed catalog 20: Architecture, R - Z
v. 51  Classed catalog 21: Geography and Maps
v. 52  Classed catalog 22: Introduction [to] and Philosophy of History; Jewish History; Weights and Measures
v. 53  Classed catalog 23: Numismatics, Chronology, Mythology, History, Diplomacy, and Inscriptions
v. 54  Classed catalog 24: Voyages and Travels
v. 55  Classed catalog 25: Ancient History
v. 56  Classed catalog 26: Modern History and Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese History
v. 57  Classed catalog 27: French History and Switzerland
v. 58  Classed catalog 28: German Dutch and Belgian Histories
v. 59  Classed catalog 29: Scandinavian, Russian and Polish Histories
v. 60  Classed catalog 30: English History, A- L
v. 61  Classed catalog 31: English History, M - Z
v. 62  Classed catalog 32: American History, A - L
v. 63  Classed catalog 33: American History, M - Z
v. 64  Classed catalog 34: Orientalia
v. 65  Classed catalog 35: African History and of The Indian and Pacific Isles
v. 66  Classed catalog 36: Italian, Spanish and Portuguese Literature
v. 67  Classed catalog 37: French Literature
v. 68  Classed catalog 38: German, Dutch and Scandinavian Literature, A - S
v. 69  Classed catalog 39: German, Dutch and Scandinavian Literature, S - Z
v. 70  Classed catalog 40: English Literature
v. 71  Classed catalog 41: Greek and Latin Classics
v. 72  Classed catalog 42: Greek and Latin Philology
v. 73  Classed catalog 43: Linguistics and Rhetoric
v. 74  Classed catalog 44: Botanical Works
v. 75  Classed catalog 45: American Literature
v. 76  Classed catalog 46: Books in the Sliding Shelves
v. 77  Classed catalog 47: Scientific Transactions, and [Literary and Scientific] Periodicals
v. 78-80  Sample Entries from the Card Catalogue ca. 1860
v. 81-83  Catalogue of Additions 1857[?]-1886
b. 50  List of Books on Shorthand and Rhetoric n.d.
v. 84  List of Pamphlets on Independence, Civil War & American History n.d.
v. 85  List of Books not on the Printed Index n.d.
v. 86  Record of Shelf Changes 1876-1877
C. Periodicals 1855-1895

The Periodicals and Serials Currently Received are printed pamphlets listing those periodicals received at the Astor. New lists were not printed every year; for some years the most recent pamphlet was updated with manuscript annotations. Periodical Lists/Books are manuscript books - or Periodicals Received pamphlets extended with sheets - that register the receipt of periodical numbers each month. There are no lists for 1877 and 1879. Periodical Registers list periodicals and their shelfmarks. Periodicals Deficient/Incomplete Books are volumes that list periodicals, books, and pamphlets sent out for binding.

v. 87-88  Periodicals and Serials Currently Received 1855-1896
b. 51-52  Periodical Lists/Books 1863-1887
b. 53    Periodical Registers 1880-1895
b. 54    Periodicals Deficient/Incomplete Books n.d.

D. Pamphlets 1866-1911

Pamphlets Accessions are manuscript volumes giving the accession numbers, titles, authors, and dates of pamphlets acquired by the Astor. Pamphlet Catalogs include a written catalog of pamphlets to the year 1866 and a "List of Pamphlets Relating to the War of Independence, the Civil War, and General American History" (ca. 1879). Other records pertaining to pamphlets in the Astor Library may be found in the Acquisitions, Catalogs, and Unsorted volumes subseries.

v. 92-96  Pamphlet Accessions 1880-1910
v. 97    Pamphlet Catalogs 1866, ca. 1879
b. 55-56  E. Unsorted Volumes 1876-1910
          Digest/Memoranda of New Publications 1880 (4 volumes)
          Reclamations (Miscellaneous) 1882
          Foreign Bills, Returns 1877-1878
          Books Returned to Sabin & Sons and Scribner & Co. 1877
          Mr. Nelson's Reports on the New Catalogue 1886
          Books Returned & Corrections to Orders 1894-1896
          Books Wanted n.d.
          List of Rare Books & Papers in the Cabinets or Boxes in the Cupboard in the Office Room and Show-Cases 1886
          Blotter (Memoranda) 1877-1878
          Foreign Orders 1878-1881
          Astor Library Catalogue Department (Issue of Cards) 1876-1877
          New Books, American & English 1876-1877
          Re Cards 1894
          Reclamations 1882-1896
          Order to Terquem 1895
          Book List, George B. Mason n.d.
          W. J. J. Astor List n.d.
          Temporary Transfers from the Lenox n.d.
          Package Receipts 1910
          Untitled List n.d.

E. Unsorted Volumes 1876-1910
Series III. Readers 1859-1911 (7.5 linear feet)

The Daily Record gives the author, title, volume, reader, and sometimes the reader's address for each book consulted for each day of the Astor Library's operations from 1860 to 1882. There are separate volumes of records for the South and North buildings, with no record for the North Building for the years 1862 and 1863. The Diary of Subjects gives a daily listing of books used by subject, with monthly tallies of use at the end of each volume. There are separate volumes for the South and North buildings. The Statistics of Readers are the NYPL continuations of the Diary of Subjects. The Register of Readers & Volumes Consulted gives daily, monthly, and yearly totals of volumes and readers served, as well as percentage increases and averages for readership, calculated over time.

Alcove Readers are volumes including the subjects and signatures of alcove readers for each day of library operation. There are separate volumes for the South and North buildings to 1882, the South Building's records beginning in 1864. A list of Alcove Readers in the North Building during 1861 can be found in the Daily Record of 1861. There is no volume for the North Building for 1883. Both buildings have common records from 1884 to 1899. Alcove Admissions are books that give the name of alcove readers, their respective subjects, and sometimes the time periods for which they were granted privileges. Patents Index to Visitors lists the names and addresses of individuals who consulted the patents collection by date.

v. 98 Daily Record, North Building 1860
v. 99 Daily Record, North Building 1860-1861
v. 100 Daily Record, North Building 1864-1865
v. 101 Daily Record, North Building 1866-1867
v. 102 Daily Record, North Building 1867-1868
v. 103 Daily Record, North Building 1869-1870
v. 104 Daily Record, North Building 1871-1873
v. 105 Daily Record, North Building 1873-1875
v. 106 Daily Record, North Building 1875-1876
v. 107 Daily Record, North Building 1877-1878
v. 108 Daily Record, North Building 1878-1879
v. 109 Daily Record, South Building 1879-1881
v. 110 Daily Record, South Building 1860-1863
v. 111 Daily Record, South Building 1860
v. 112 Daily Record, South Building 1864-1865
v. 113 Daily Record, South Building 1866-1867
v. 114 Daily Record, South Building 1867
v. 115 Daily Record, South Building 1869
v. 116 Daily Record, South Building 1871-1872
v. 117 Daily Record, South Building 1873-1875
v. 118 Daily Record, South Building 1876-1877
v. 119 Daily Record, South Building 1877-1878
v. 120 Daily Record, South Building 1879-1880
v. 121 Daily Record, South Building 1880-1882
v. 122 Diary of Subjects, North Building 1859-1860
v. 123 Diary of Subjects, North Building 1865
v. 124 Diary of Subjects, North Building 1866-1867
v. 125 Diary of Subjects, North Building 1867-1868
v. 126 Diary of Subjects, North Building 1874-1875
Series III. Readers (cont.)
v. 127 Diary of Subjects, North Building 1878-1888
v. 128 Diary of Subjects, North Building 1896
v. 129 Diary of Subjects, South Building 1859-1860
v. 130 Diary of Subjects, South Building 1865
v. 131 Diary of Subjects, South Building 1866-1867
v. 132 Diary of Subjects, South Building 1868-1873
v. 133 Diary of Subjects, South Building 1874-1875
v. 134 Diary of Subjects, South Building 1878-1888
v. 135 Diary of Subjects, South Building 1896
v. 136-138 Statistics of Readers 1897-1911
  b. 57 Readers Tickets n.d.
v. 139 Register of Readers & Volumes Consulted 1877-1899
  b. 58 Alcove Readers, North Building 1860-1890
v. 140 Alcove Readers, South Building 1864-1868
v. 141 Alcove Readers, South Building 1868-1873
v. 142 Alcove Readers, South Building 1873-1877
v. 143 Alcove Readers, North Building 1872-1877
v. 144 Alcove Readers 1878-82
v. 145 Alcove Readers 1878-1883
v. 146 Alcove Readers 1884-1885
v. 147 Alcove Readers 1886-1887
v. 148 Alcove Readers 1887-1889
v. 149 Alcove Readers 1889-1891
v. 150 Alcove Readers 1891-1895
v. 151 Alcove Readers 1895-1899
v. 152-155 Alcove Admissions 1882-1899
v. 156-165 Patents Index to Visitors 1862-1896

Series IV. Finance 1848-1896 (11 linear feet)

Series includes Finance Committee Minutes for 1892. The Treasurer’s Correspondence refers to properties of the Astor Library, as do the Mortgage, Loan, and Insurance Papers & Book. Monthly Statements are monthly accountings of credits and debits. Ledgers are extant for all years from 1876 to 1896 except 1882, 1883, and 1887. The Cash Book is a journal listing amounts paid to vendors and individuals by date. Invoice Books and Invoices contain invoices from vendors and books of transcriptions of billings. There are no invoice records for the years 1880-1886 and 1889-1890. The Receipt Books for Salaries are books where library employees placed their signatures upon receipt of salary payment. Petty Cash Books are records of cash dispensed for sundries.

Checkbooks are the stub records of checks written. The earliest are for checks drawn on the Gallatin National Bank (1858-1890), and there are also checks for the Pacific Bank (1876-1896) and the Union Trust (1890-1895). Canceled Checks are written on accounts with the National Bank (1848-1861), the Gallatin National Bank (1862-1876), the Pacific Bank (1876-1879, 1887-1896) and the East River National Bank (1878). There are Bank Books for the National, Gallatin National, East River, Second National and Pacific banks. The Receipt Book records sums of money received and dispensed by the Astor. Package Receipt Books from the United States Express Company comprise receipts for the shipment of packages.

v. 166 Finance Committee Minutes 1892
b. 59-60 Treasurer’s Correspondence 1890-1892
Series IV. Finance (cont.)

v. 167 Mortgage, Loan and Insurance Papers & Book 1870-1892
b. 61 Monthly Statements 1876-1883
b. 62 Monthly Statements 1884-1887, 1889
b. 63 Monthly Statements 1875-1885, 1884-1891
v. 168 Monthly Statements 1892-1896
v. 169 Monthly Statements 1896-1898
b. 64 Ledgers & Invoice Books 1876-1896
v. 170 Cash Book 1876-1878
b. 65 Invoice Books & Invoices 1876-1891
v. 171 Receipt Book for Salaries 1879-1890
v. 172 Petty Cash Books 1871-1890
b. 66-67 Checkbooks 1858-1896
b. 68 Canceled Checks 1848-1896