

Exploring the American Idea at the New York Public Library

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In the aftermath of the Second World War, as American society adjusted to the political and international landscape of the early Cold War, librarians examined the role of libraries as agencies of culture. With mounting fears about Communist expansion, government agencies, foundations, and the mass media undertook efforts to educate citizens about the meaning of democracy. Librarians, following intense wartime activity, returned to questions about the public library's appropriate clientele and collections. At the New York Public Library a new reading and discussion group, "Exploring the American Idea" (EAI), merged these strands of societal and professional concerns. Focused on the meaning of the American democratic tradition in turbulent times, EAI can be viewed as part of the postwar effort to create a liberal consensus around democratic values. An adult education program based on the Great Books model, EAI can be regarded as the embodiment of the library as an agency of culture providing serious works to an educated elite. A closer look, however, suggests that as it developed, *Exploring the American Idea* gave participants room to question the liberal consensus and offered the library a means to expand its audience beyond its traditional base.

In the decade before the war, librarians struggled to define their role in the burgeoning adult education movement. The American Library Association (ALA) had been a charter member of the American Association of Adult Education (AAAE) founded in 1926 with the support of the Carnegie Corporation, and among the myriad religious, farm, university, and civic groups involved in adult education only librarians served whole communities and supported the spec-

trum of adult educators. Through the 1930s, however, the profession was divided between those who questioned the educational role of the library and those who welcomed the role and believed librarians should be in the lead. In 1941 Ralph Beals observed that the scope and functions of the American public library were in dispute, even among librarians. While agreeing on the role of libraries as conservators of culture and as "service stations for the ready supply of answers to miscellaneous questions," many were skeptical of education as an ultimate objective of the library.¹

At the New York Public Library (NYPL), however, the adult education concept infused the approach to adult services.² Since 1928, when Jennie Flexner established the Readers' Adviser's Office, the library had sought to offer services to adults comparable to that offered to children and other specialized clientele. Through individual consultations, the office suggested courses of readings to meet the interests and goals of each reader. Under Flexner's leadership, the office also developed extensive group services to the unemployed during the Depression and to immigrants fleeing Europe in the late 1930s. Bibliographies prepared for such radio shows as "Town Meeting of the Air" extended the reach of the library, but in a supportive rather than independent role.

With the outbreak of war, librarians turned their attention from parochial professional debates to the practical matter of supporting the war effort. Other professional priorities, including the nascent quest for federal funding, were put on hold as librarians plunged into the Victory Bond campaign and turned their libraries into War Information Centers. The war heightened rhetoric about library and democracy. Speakers from Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt equated libraries and democracy, heralding the role of libraries in creating the informed citizenry and preserving the cultural heritage that would win the war.³ Seeking a role comparable to the Library War Service that had boosted the visibility of libraries during World War I, public libraries emphasized their role as community information centers rather than as cultural agencies.⁴

Following the war, the tension between the library as an agency of adult education meeting the needs of a well-educated few and as a political agency undergirding the democratic process became more apparent. Picking up the pieces of the national plan for library service developed in 1943, librarians resumed lobbying for federal assistance to support the creation of public libraries in underserved, largely rural areas. Proposed by Emily Taft Douglas in 1946, the Public Library Service Demonstration Bill echoed the democratic rhetoric of the war years, with supporters ritually heralding the library as the embodiment of democratic values.⁵ Indeed, the library extension effort was premised on the belief that democracy required and depended on libraries within the reach of all citizens.

While federal support for rural libraries suggested the widest possible reach for library service, librarians in urban areas in 1946 adopted a new adult education initiative based on the Great Books curriculum and aimed at a limited, self-

selected audience. This approach assumed that the classic texts of western civilization could profitably be read by anyone with an interest, regardless of their educational background. Small groups of about thirty were to meet every two weeks with lay leaders trained in the Socratic method. Public libraries in Chicago and Cleveland led the way, drawing serious readers to the library for discussion and debate.

Beginning also in 1946, the Public Library Inquiry joined questions about the public library's role as an agency of adult education with doubts about the profession's faith in the library as an embodiment of democratic values.⁶ Undertaken at first to examine personnel issues, the inquiry grew into a full-blown study of the current status of virtually every aspect of American public libraries, including not only staffing, but also funding, governance, and how libraries were actually being used by the American public. Funded by the Carnegie Corporation, the study was conducted by the Social Science Research Council and led by Robert Leigh heading a team of social scientists and advised by a committee including Ralph A. Beals of the New York Public Library.⁷

Ralph Beals, appointed NYPL director in 1946, was connected to several of these strands of library concern and activity. An early proponent of library adult education, he had served on the staff of the American Association for Adult Education from 1933 to 1939. As Assistant Director of the District of Columbia Public Library, from 1940 to 1942, he had spearheaded the library's war activities, transforming his office into a War Information Center and heading the ALA's War Service Committee on Information and Education.⁸ Beals had then served as director of the library and dean of the Graduate Library School at the University of Chicago. While there, he had become a close associate of Robert M. Hutchins, president of the university and proponent, with Mortimer Adler, of the Great Books approach to learning. Beals joined the board of the Great Books Foundation when it was created in 1947.⁹

Beals's scholarly background and his interest in community outreach matched the dual identity of the New York Public Library as both a privately endowed, research institution and a metropolitan public library. The library's internal organization reflected this division. The Reference Department maintained the research collections and served the clientele of the Central Library at Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street; the Circulation Department oversaw the library's Carnegie branches funded by the city budget. Similarly, NYPL seemed to have found a middle ground in the debate over whether the public library should meet the more serious educational needs of its users or cater to their more popular reading demands. The library assumed its readers would be interested in the best works and able to appreciate them. At the 1936 conference of the American Library Association, Esther Johnston, head of the NYPL Central Circulation Branch, warned against underestimating the taste and intelligence of borrowers. Making a plea for "the reader of apparently ordinary tastes whose potentialities are apt to be overlooked," she argued against lowering standards by too much popularizing.¹⁰ The introduction of the Great Books program, at Beals's sug-

gestion in 1947,¹¹ demonstrated this confidence in readers. Open to anyone interested, the Great Books program had no special educational qualifications, but as described in an NYPL brochure, put the burden on the participant:

This type of social reading requires your active participation. . . . The trained leaders will not tell you what you should think about the books. You will express your own understanding of what you read and will exchange your views with those of other members of the group. The leaders will not deliver lectures on the authors or the books; they will simply help the discussion by asking questions.¹²

In the first three series of Great Books, only *The Federalist Papers* and works by Thoreau were by Americans, although several, including those by John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and Adam Smith, had significantly influenced American political thought.

In the aftermath of World War II and the early years of the Cold War, interest in the meaning of democracy was widespread. Using programs and exhibits, the NYPL responded to this interest and used it to promote the library. The journey of the Freedom Train from September 1947 to January 1949 spurred such activity. Funded by the new, non-partisan American Heritage Foundation, comprised largely of business and media executives, the train displayed important documents of United States history from Columbus's discovery of America to the 1945 United Nations Charter.¹³ A library brochure showed a toy train heading up the steps of the Central Building where the library displayed copies of documents on the train and related materials from its own collections.¹⁴ In each of the exhibited documents, "there [was] to be found a principle—a thread of history—which was to become an essential part of the American tradition."¹⁵ A "Heritage of Freedom" brochure for Staten Island branches invited additional reading on the heritage theme including biographies of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Abigail Adams, *John Brown's Body*, *Leaves of Grass*, *O Pioneers!* and *Folk Song U.S.A.* by John Lomax.¹⁶

After the Freedom Train departed, the NYPL's *Branch Library Book News*, continued the heritage theme with a lengthy bibliographic essay, "Exploring the American Mind" by Margaret E. Monroe, assistant readers' adviser.¹⁷ Mixing historical monographs, biographies, novels, poetry, folklore, and government reports, Monroe's list included works by dissenters from the American tradition, notably Henry George and Eugene V. Debs, and those excluded from its privileges, notably women and the poor, represented by Jane Addams and Lillian Wald. Surprisingly, given the library's own notable Schomberg Collection and its interest in race relations,¹⁸ there were no African American writers on the list, although it included Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* and Gustave Myers's *A History of Bigotry in the United States*. The issue also included lists of American historical novels,¹⁹ books by and about women,²⁰ and information



Figure 1: A brochure invited the public to follow a visit to the Freedom Train with a trip to the New York Public Library. “The Freedom Train Leads to the Library.” *Courtesy of New York Public Library Archives, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.*

on upcoming programs on the library's radio show, "Treasury of the Spoken Word," including Ralph Bellamy reading from "Leaves of Grass," Donald Crisp on Longfellow's poems, and Clifton Fadiman on Patrick Henry.

As pressures from censors and anti-communist politicians increased in the late 1940s, the library had its own interest in the interpretation of basic democratic values. Books in New York City school libraries had been challenged, and the New York Public Library itself faced concerns about owning or lending controversial works. When a New York state court in November 1946 declared Edmund Wilson's *Memoirs of Hecate County* to be obscene, the library removed the book from circulation and informed readers on the waiting list that it was no longer available.²¹ In 1948, the New York City schools had banned *The Nation* because of Paul Blanshard's articles criticizing the Catholic Church.²² Meeting in Atlantic City in June 1948, the American Library Association, under its president Paul North Rice, chief of the NYPL Reference Department, condemned censorship as a threat to democracy and reaffirmed the Library Bill of Rights, adopted originally in 1939. Describing the library as "an institution of education for democratic living," it stated that "the library should welcome the use of its meeting rooms for socially useful and cultural activities and discussion of current public questions" with meeting rooms available on equal terms regardless of the beliefs and affiliations of their members.²³

With the meaning of the American democracy a practical as well as a scholarly matter, Beals convened a Committee on the American Tradition, in fall 1949, at the library to develop a plan to "provide an environment favorable to reading and reflection on what the American way of life is."²⁴ After reading and discussing numerous works, the committee in February 1950 unanimously endorsed implementation of a reading and discussion project at the library to promote the understanding of American democracy:

We look upon this series of readings and discussions . . . as an attempt to find the living tradition of America. It is an attempt to analyze the ideas important in the development of this tradition and to relate them to the present. It is an intellectual adventure in which the ideals of our culture—sometimes unattained or disregarded—are reexamined through writings expressive of fundamental viewpoints which are now a part of our heritage.²⁵

The committee's tentative reading list included the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*, Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, writings by Henry David Thoreau, Abraham Lincoln, Walt Whitman ("On Ontario's Blue Shore"), William V. Moody ("Ode in Time of Hesitation"), John Dewey and Woodrow Wilson. Recent works included the *Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights*, the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and a selection by

David Lilienthal, former head of the Tennessee Valley Authority and current chair of the Atomic Energy Commission. The committee had also considered works by Ben Franklin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Adams, Lincoln Steffens, John Woolman, and James Bryce and continued to refine its list. In May 1950 the committee recommended to Beals that the readings be tested in two or three experimental groups using the Great Books model. "By this we mean the following: Two leaders who use the Socratic method. Small groups of approximately 15-20 members. Two hour meetings every other week."²⁶ The committee presented a fully developed reading list. Paine, Moody, and Dewey had been removed, while George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Oliver Wendell Holmes had been added. The list included background information on each reading, questions for discussion, and information on the document's availability.²⁷

Tellingly, the committee used as the program theme a quotation from the foreword of *This I Do Believe* by David Lilienthal, published by Harper & Brothers in 1949. "What as individuals can we do to safeguard and nourish this great inheritance?" Lilienthal asked. "I say: Search our minds and our souls and find out what it is we believe about democracy and about America."²⁸ To anyone following the rightward tilt of Congress, the use of this quotation seemed to signal where the library stood in the debates over the meaning of democracy. As former head of TVA, Lilienthal was associated with New Deal government now seen by some as socialism tending toward Communism. Lilienthal had written this statement of his political faith after a tense confirmation hearing before the Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy, in February 1947, when Senator Kenneth D. McKellar (D-Tenn.) accused him of having leftist sympathies and demanded to know his convictions on Communist doctrine. In this foreshadowing of McCarthyism, Lilienthal's passionate defense of democracy as an affirmative doctrine built on the rights of the individual attracted widespread attention.

The initial EAI texts and questions for discussion reflected the liberal consensus of postwar values. Based on rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, guarded by freedom of religion and speech, this view assumed the need of a strong central government to protect individual liberty, accomplish the nation's purposes, and work toward the realization of American ideals. This strong government must be balanced by active citizen participation and resistance to tyranny through the constitutional process. For a discussion of the Declaration of Independence, the EAI reading list suggested, among others, these questions: "In what ways are men equal? Why are governments instituted? May a government be overthrown? In the list of abuses are there any we would accept without protest today?"²⁹ Throughout, democracy was seen as the means to solve the problems of democracy.

Thus Exploring the American Idea implicitly challenged the idea of American society as one of pluralistic harmony and widely shared consensus. Indeed, the proposed questions suggested that major differences could exist on the fundamental nature of American democracy. Unlike the Freedom Train, which al-

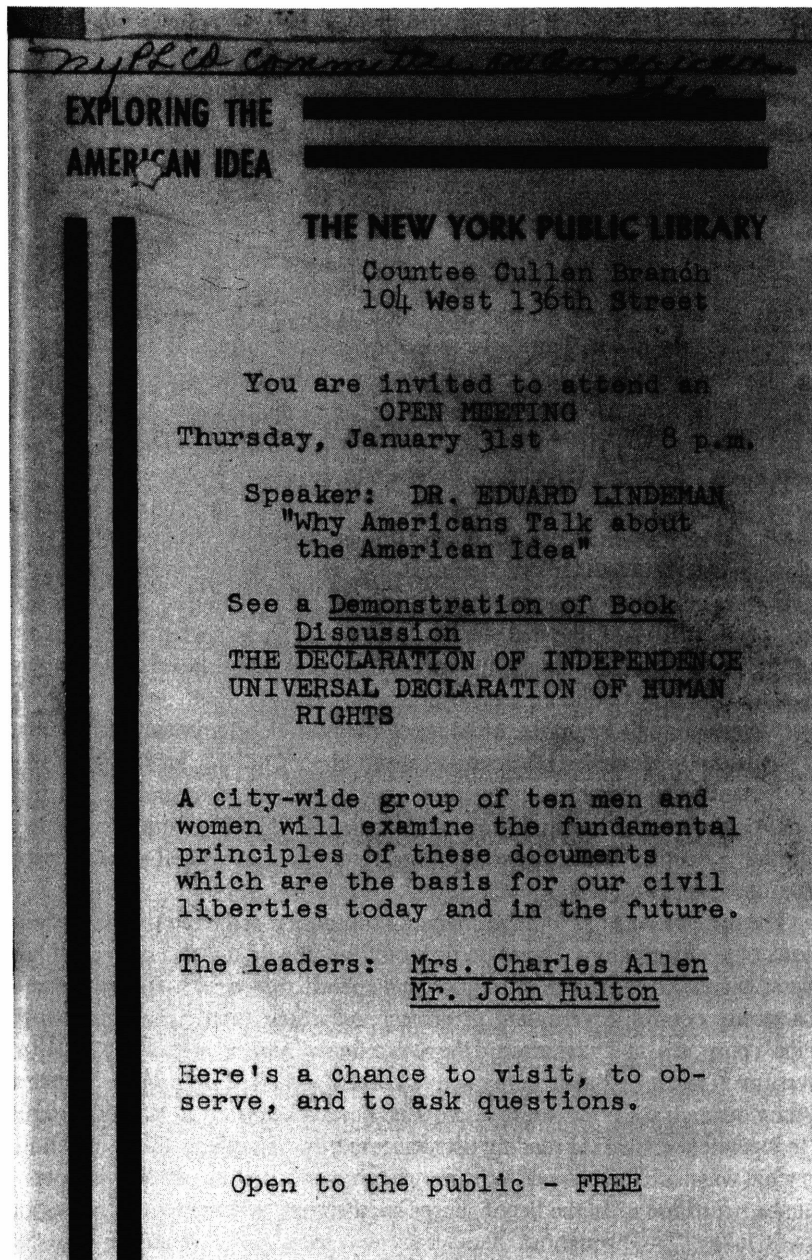


Figure 2: To generate interest in the new program, the library sponsored a demonstration of group discussion at the Countee Cullen Branch. "Exploring the American Idea-memo." *Courtesy of New York Public Library Archives, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.*

lowed a brief glimpse of documents to the crowds filing through the exhibit, EAI required active engagement with the meaning of the texts. Rather than a prepackaged interpretation of the meaning of the American democratic tradition, the reading and discussion format of EAI put that interpretation up for consideration. It suggested that difference and dissent were part of not only the American past but also the American present and that citizenship involved questioning as well as accepting the basis of that tradition.

Although the Great Books influence on Exploring the American Idea was apparent, the two programs diverged on the extent to which they allowed participants to challenge the set curriculum. They shared a belief that the discussion method of free and full investigation of ideas was the only proper basis for decision and that in the realm of ideas all decisions could be re-examined. Both used challenging primary texts and were open to all wishing to read the selections and to consider, in discussion, their major ideas. A single brochure advertised both discussion groups for fall 1950,³⁰ and their leader training sessions met jointly. Among the first group of EAI leaders were two community people who had led Great Books discussions.

But the Great Books reading courses were formulated by the Great Books Foundation in Chicago, with the same unchanging sequential series used by groups all over the country. EAI was based on this model with readings and discussion questions selected by librarians. Even in the experimental year, however, EAI groups chose their own topics and decided on their own readings. Mildred Mathews reported that at the Central Library two groups, largely made up of professional people, and a group in the Bronx, mostly housewives, followed the prescribed program. In contrast, a more diverse group in West New Brighton branch on Staten Island, jettisoned many of the readings as “too heavy going” and instead added essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Lincoln Steffen’s *Autobiography*, various plays, poems, and *Manhattan Transfer*, a novel by John Dos Passos.³¹ The use of a flexible reading list, democratically selected, including popular works as well as classics, became the hallmark of Exploring the American Idea groups. The act of reading and discussion became as important as the specific selections on democracy; the democratic process undergirded consideration of it.

While adapting the Great Books model to the local library, Exploring the American Idea served as the model for a national program of reading and discussion on the meaning of the American democratic tradition. Historically, libraries had acted as cultural agents in local communities. A coincidence of events in spring and summer of 1951, however, transformed Exploring the American Idea from a local program of the New York Public Library to a national program of the American Library Association. Planning its seventy-fifth anniversary, ALA had appointed an anniversary committee, chaired by Ralph Ellsworth, librarian of the State University of Iowa, to develop a theme and program. Sensing that the country’s perils presented both dangers and opportunities for America’s libraries, the committee proposed the theme: “The Heritage of th

United States in a Time of Crisis." Ellsworth was aware of the NYPL program and in December 1950 had asked Ralph Beals if he might share the preliminary report of the Committee on the American Tradition with his group. He had already secured \$10,000 from Gardner Cowles, publisher of *Look* magazine and a major supporter of the Freedom Train and had arranged for Harper and Brothers to issue two books on the American heritage theme in October 1951. Journalist Gerald W. Johnson was to write a popular volume on six important problems facing the nation, while historian Henry Steele Commager was to edit a sourcebook of documents.

Exploring the American Idea had also attracted the attention of C. Scott Fletcher, head of the new Fund for Adult Education (FAE). Created by the Ford Foundation in its effort to settle its tax status with the Internal Revenue Service, the fund had a particular interest in civic and adult education. Working behind the scenes with Carl Milam, departing executive director of ALA, and his successor John Mackenzie Cory, Fletcher indicated the fund's interest in supporting reading and discussion groups modeled on NYPL's fledgling program. On July 13, 1951, he informed Cory that the FAE board had formally approved a \$150,000 grant to ALA for "the promotion and demonstration of adult community discussion programs on the American heritage and its contemporary application, to be undertaken by means of a continuing program through the agency of public libraries."³² ALA was to coordinate and support local program activities, select six demonstration areas, conduct a training program, and seek the guidance of other national groups. The grant's size, huge compared to other foundation support of ALA, and the program's national scope promised a greatly expanded audience for the public library as an independent agent of adult education.

Since FAE had specified that ALA base its training and promotional materials on the New York Public Library experience,³³ New York City was named one of the six initial sites along with Athens, Georgia, the state of Vermont, La Crosse, Wisconsin, Denver, Colorado, and Los Angeles County, California. In October 1951, librarians from the participating libraries attended a week-long orientation in New York City where they observed a model group discussion of the Declaration of Independence led by Margaret Monroe and Ida Goshkin, head of training for the American Heritage Project, and a Great Books group at the 96th Street branch.

The American Heritage Project was ALA's first national adult education program to be centralized in both theme and implementation. The Great Issues program, introduced as part of the Four Year Goals in 1948, had promoted the discussion of serious current issues in libraries but went no further than book lists on the selected issues, including world government, civil rights, and inflation, programming suggestions, and posters.³⁴ Although discussion groups were suggested, few were organized. Librarians had little support for the effort, and it was generally regarded as unsuccessful.³⁵ In contrast, the American Heritage Project provided reading materials through its office in Chicago along with train-

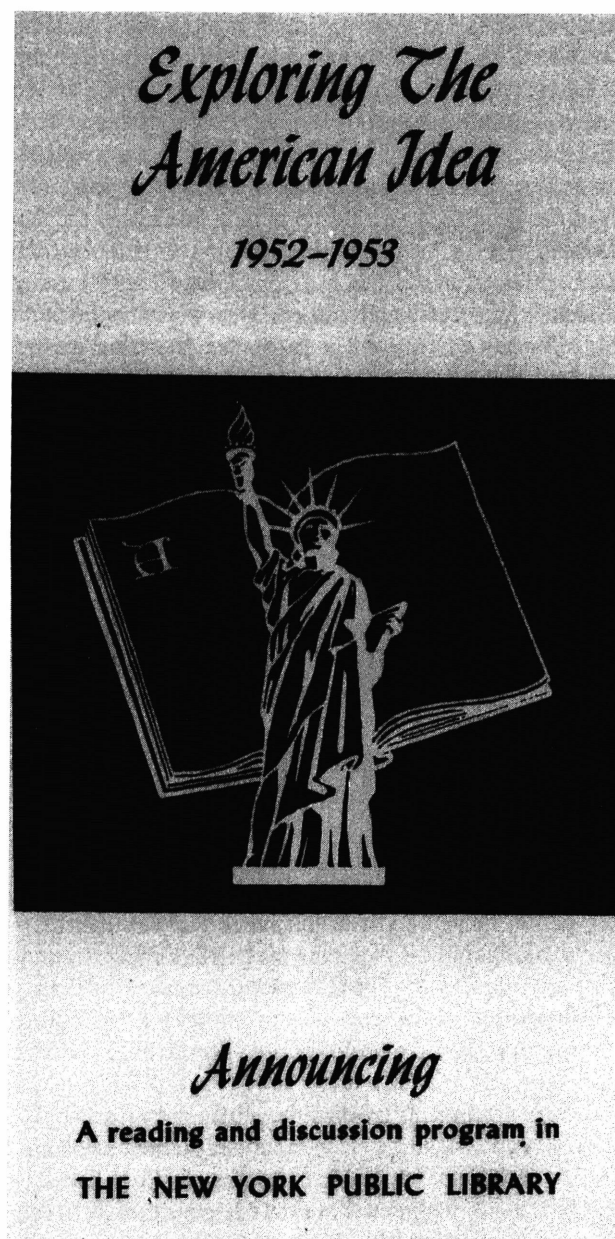


Figure 3: As part of the ALA's American Heritage Project, the Exploring the American Idea program used the AHP logo of the Statue of Liberty in its publicity materials. "Exploring the American Idea-title page." *Courtesy of New York Public Library Archives, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.*

ing and follow-up consultation by project staff. Nonetheless, AHP displayed the same local autonomy and flexibility that characterized Exploring the American Idea. ALA's position that the choice of topics, readings, and pace would be left not just to local communities but to individual discussion groups enabled it to deflect potential criticism of the project from political conservatives.³⁶

Like its use of the Lillenthal quotation, the program's links to Commager and Johnson put the program squarely within the bounds of the liberal democratic consensus. The format of Commager's *Living Ideas in America*, with primary documents grouped around issues appropriate for discussion, allowed groups to choose their own topics and readings. Heavy on writings of the Founding Fathers and New Dealers, it offered a more diverse array than earlier EAI readings. It included works by African Americans W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington and suffragists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony and omitted writings by utopians, anarchists, Wobblies, and union leaders. Excerpts by Jane Addams, Catherine Beecher, and Dorothy Canfield Fisher confined women's voices to social welfare and education issues. Commager himself was on hand at the training institute in New York to discuss the materials.³⁷ In contrast to Commager's selection of primary documents, Gerald W. Johnson's *This American People* presented the view of one writer, an unabashed New Dealer and enthusiast of democracy.³⁸ Written to stimulate discussion, it emphasized that hard work and courage were necessary to sustain democracy and was used in conjunction with study guides prepared by such groups as the General Federation of Women's Clubs.

Discussion groups gave libraries an opportunity to expand their potential as agencies of adult education and to enlarge their audience for serious works on current issues. In this, both EAI and AHP seemed to fulfill the recommendations appearing in the studies of the Public Library Inquiry published by Columbia University Press from 1949 to 1951. Finding that only a small fraction of the public used the public library and tended to seek popular, ephemeral material, the PLI challenged the notion of the library as bulwark of democracy. Libraries, they concluded, were limited by the self-selected nature of their audience and the emergent competition of the mass media. In light of this, libraries should concentrate on reaching local communications elites with serious, controversial works of long-lasting interest.³⁹

The evolution of Exploring the American Idea, however, suggests that the library went beyond this role to reach an expanded audience outside the library. The use of new media became crucial to this outreach effort. Based on the Great Books model, EAI had not included film in its design, although as early as spring 1950 NYPL had begun training film discussion leaders and conducting separate film discussion series. Nor had the use of film been mentioned in planning the American Heritage Project. The Fund for Adult Education had a strong interest in film, however, through its president, Scott Fletcher, former head of Encyclopaedia Britannica Films, and Grace Stevenson, head of the American Heritage Project, a pioneer in the use of films at the Seattle Public Library.⁴⁰

Films were an integral part of the American Heritage training session in New York in October 1951, with Ida Goshkin showing "Due Process of Law Denied" based on *The Oxbow Incident* and leading discussion on the issues it raised.

Planned before joining the American Heritage Project, the second year of Exploring the American Idea seemed much like the first, but AHP funding changed the program's size and composition. The 1951-1952 brochure again announced both EAI and Great Books groups and used the same quotation from David Lilienthal. EAI expanded to fifteen groups, met at additional branches, and used program materials produced by ALA. The major difference lay in the addition of film discussion groups in six branches with newly purchased movies and equipment.⁴¹ A brochure resembling a piece of film advertised the program as:

A film review of our heritage. An adult discussion series to investigate basic principles of our society through motion pictures. At this critical time we seek democratic solutions to democracy's problems. Come to your neighborhood branch library once in two weeks. 8 P.M. FREE⁴²

Films were central to extending the library's reach.⁴³ They promised to expand the library's audience but, used without readings, they changed the dynamic of group discussion. Film audiences were larger, more anonymous, and changed from week to week. They required little or no advance preparation. With increased emphasis on group service and the use of films, EAI discussion groups moved away from individual interaction with text and small group consideration of them. In extending its reach as an agency of culture, the library assumed a new role as adult educator using non-print media but lessened the opportunity for individual engagement. Participants became more passive than active, the program more entertainment than education.

At the end of the 1951-52 project year, Mildred Mathews reported overall success far exceeding the library's hopes. The flexibility of the program, necessitated by the diversity of the city, was seen as a major strength. Reporting to ALA, she described New York as a series of disconnected communities with wide variations in racial and economic status that caused tensions as neighborhoods changed. "Any program," she observed, "that is designed for New York City (from rural Staten Island, to footloose central Manhattan, to kaleidoscopic Bronx) must be extremely flexible in methods and materials." The program's ability to reflect this heterogeneity was a key interest of project staff. In her report, Mathews commented,

The quality and content of the discussion is unusually good. This is due not only to the leaders and materials, but also to the great variety in the educational, religious, and racial backgrounds of the participants as well as in their occupations.

The image features a vertical film strip on the left side, with several frames containing text. The top frame shows a dark circle. The second frame reads: "EXPLORING THE AMERICAN IDEA" A FILM REVIEW OF OUR HERITAGE. The third frame reads: An Adult Discussion Series To INVESTIGATE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF OUR SOCIETY through Motion Pictures. The fourth frame reads: At this critical time we seek DEMOCRATIC SOLUTIONS to DEMOCRACY'S PROBLEMS. The fifth frame reads: COME TO YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD BRANCH LIBRARY Once in two weeks 8 P.M. FREE. The sixth frame reads: DISCUSSION SERIES HELD IN 6 BRANCHES. SEE OTHER SIDE FOR SCHEDULE. The right side of the image is a poster titled "EXPLORING THE AMERICAN IDEA" with a handwritten number "36" in the top right corner. The poster lists "Film Discussion Groups" and is organized into three sections: BROOKLYN, MANHATTAN, and STATEN ISLAND. Each section lists a library branch, its address, and the date of the first session.

EXPLORING THE AMERICAN IDEA
36

Film Discussion Groups

BROOKLYN

Hunt's Point Branch
877 Southern Boulevard
First Session
WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 14

Mott Haven Branch
321 East 140th Street
First Session
MONDAY, NOVEMBER 19

Tremont Branch
1866 Washington Avenue
First Session
THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 8

Woodstock Branch
761 East 140th Street
First Session
THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 15

MANHATTAN

115th Street Branch
203 West 115th Street
First Session
WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 14

STATEN ISLAND

Stapleton Branch
132 Canal Street
First Session
TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 20

Figure 4: The use of film broadened the audience for library discussion groups. "Exploring the American Idea-film discussion groups." *Courtesy of New York Public Library Archives, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.*

There are old and new Americans, Puerto Ricans, American Negroes, Europeans, lawyers, actors. Clerks, Catholics, Jews and Protestants, high school graduates and others with advanced degrees, young adults and some not so young, etc.⁴⁴

Mathews reported that thirteen groups had used the original list from the Committee on the American Tradition; one advanced group used a second series of readings, selected by leaders. Six film discussion groups used different combinations of books, films, and pamphlets, each using film in a different way. "There has been," she concluded, "no rigid overall pattern." Thus, as the group members increasingly made decisions about the topics and works to be discussed, the role of the librarian as book expert and arbiter of taste was diminished in an increasingly democratic selection process.

While there were quantifiable indicators of success, including an increase in the numbers of participants and groups and in the proportion of groups led by community volunteers, many benefits were intangible.⁴⁵ Librarians and participants profited from enhanced leadership skills, enrichment from sharing ideas with others, the opportunity to read new and sometimes challenging works, and to meet and work with new people. In addition, the program had given the library greater visibility, attracting non-users and calling the library to the attention of other institutions in the city, including the Board of Education, New York University, and the League of Women Voters. Most importantly, the library had defined itself as a safe place in which important matters could be discussed. Mathews reported,

In this time of increasing tension, loyalty oaths, and fear to speak one's mind, many people coming to these American Idea groups have exclaimed: "I had no idea we could speak so freely! Almost anywhere else it's impossible." The growing taboo on the discussion of basic principles of democracy (arising from a mistaken method of fighting communism) has made it socially incorrect in many areas (radio, schools) [and] economically unwise to inquire into the basis for our democratic government. This discussion program makes such inquiry once more "respectable", and puts a foot in the door that was gradually closing. This program, small as it is, has generated a force to help stop the development of a dangerous taboo that no democracy can afford.⁴⁶

In her report on the 1951-52 program year, Mathews noted numerous requests for assistance from organizations wishing to conduct an American Idea group,⁴⁷ so while fine-tuning the EAI reading list for 1952-53, and adding a new series on the American Character, NYPL staff proposed a greater emphasis

on group service. Ralph Beals explained that community organizations would benefit from the library's resources and experience while the library could reach a larger number of people in this way than it could reach directly with the same expenditure.⁴⁸ The library's 1952-53 report to ALA demonstrated the impact of these changes on the program's content and reach. The new series on the American Character, including biography, fiction, and films, had proven even more popular than the original American Idea series which was also losing ground to Great Books. Mildred Mathews observed,

Great Books is not only a larger established program, but it also seems to have a self-improvement or even a "snob appeal" aspect which seems to be lacking in the American Ideas series. Perhaps advertising the latter as the Great Books of America might have an effect. Numbers of people who come to this office to inquire about discussion groups, when presented with both programs, choose the Great Books.⁴⁹

The most dramatic increases, however, were in film attendance and group service. The five film discussion groups at library branches held 42 meetings with average attendance of more than 21, and, unlike other groups, included more men than women. The library also helped community organizations plan and conduct their own American Heritage programs. Nine church groups used films and pamphlets consistently; seven community centers adapted American Heritage programs for adult discussion groups; and six homes for the aged had begun programs. Overall the library helped plan programs and supplied films and materials to 60 organizations and circulated 217 films to audiences totaling 26,003.⁵⁰

Of particular note was the library's response to the interests of a group of elderly Chinese gentlemen. Because they did not speak English, a Chinese assistant from the Chatham Square branch had read to this Golden Age Club each week for two years. When the group wanted to know more about America and American history, the Office of Adult Services arranged to show films acquired for the American Idea series, including "The Declaration of Independence," "America, the Beautiful," "Due Process of Law Denied," and "Grandma Moses." With an enrollment of 51, attendance over six meetings totaled 253 and averaged 39. The library's report concluded:

"Exploring the American Idea in Chinese" has brought library service to a group which could not have been reached as effectively in any other way. Here was an adult group and an expressed need, with language and educational barriers to communication. The use of specially selected films and other materials and the encouragement of free discussion have been

one effective means of meeting The New York Public Library's responsibility to the Chinese community in New York City.⁵¹

The use of films and group services as part of the American Idea program peaked in 1953-54, the last year in which it received FAE support. While enrollment in Great Books increased from 411 to 454, participation in the American Idea series declined again, from 344 to 303. Average attendance dropped from 13.5 to 10. Nonetheless, the library planned another series of readings, focused on the American Scene, using novels, drama, and poetry. The audience for films provided by the library seemed secure, increasing by 50 percent over the previous year to 39,994. The number of films circulated increased from 217 to 625, and the number of groups served up from 60 to 110, nearly exceeding the library's ability to meet the demand.⁵² Like the library, these organizations were short-staffed and often required more assistance than the library could provide.

At the same time, many discussion groups turned their attention to affairs in their local communities. Early descriptions of the Exploring the American Idea stressed that it was a discussion not an action program. But, particularly in the film discussion groups, participants moved from talk to action. With themes often related to community issues, such as "Who's Delinquent?" on troubled youth or "The City" on urban planning, films led to "constructive action for neighborhood betterment." Discussion at the Tremont, Bronx, branch, for example, prompted creation of a neighborhood committee to get better police and sanitation services. Discussion of the film "Our Better Tomorrow" by a group at the Morrisania, Bronx, branch, including local PTA members, was credited with greater understanding of community school issues. On Staten Island, a film program led to the organization of a book discussion group on "Mental Health in the Community" led by a local psychiatrist and regional librarian.⁵³

In the postwar world, librarians sought to define the role of public libraries in adult education and to respond to the crisis of American democracy posed by the Cold War. Exploring the American Idea merged these strands, adapting the Great Books model to the public library setting for reading and discussion groups on the American democratic tradition. Beginning in New York City and then across the nation, the program enabled public libraries to fulfill the role advocated by the Public Library Inquiry, meeting the needs of well-educated and serious readers to consider the issues of the day. At the same time, however, the format of discussion, involving lay leadership, close reading of the text, and a questioning of fundamental ideas, challenged the notion of a fixed set of democratic values or a widely shared, unaltered consensus. As the program evolved, with greater group involvement in the selection of topics and reading and a more community and action-oriented focus, the group setting offered an experience of democracy as well as a consideration of it. The introduction of film discussion moved the groups further away from the Great Books model. As participation became more anonymous and more passive, the entertainment as-

pect partly eclipsed the education function. At the same time, however, film enabled the library to expand its reach and inspired action among community organizations and ethnic groups whose members might never have joined a book discussion group or been considered part of a community's educated elite. While embodying the postwar notion of democratic consensus, EAI gave scope for questioning it. While embodying the Public Library Inquiry vision for public library service, EAI provided a way for libraries to extend their reach to the broader public beyond their traditional base.

Notes

1. Ralph A. Beals and Leon Brody, *The Literature of Adult Education* (New York, 1941), 356.
2. Margaret E. Monroe, *Library Adult Education: The Biography of an Idea* (New York, 1963). Monroe provides a history of adult education at the NYPL and observes that even those libraries most actively engaged in adult education activities rarely referred to them as such. The author wishes to thank Dr. Monroe for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this article.
3. Archibald MacLeish, "The Librarian and the Democratic Process," *ALA Bulletin* 34 (June 1940): 385-388, 421-422; Franklin D. Roosevelt, "A Message to the Sixty-fourth Annual Conference of the American Library Association, Milwaukee, June 26, 1942," *ALA Bulletin* 36 (July 1942): [422]
4. "Libraries and the War," *ALA Bulletin* 36 (January 1942): 3-5. A statement adopted unanimously by the Council of the American Library Association on December 29, 1941 read, "Every library must organize its services and expenditures without delay to meet the necessities of a nation at war. Every library activity must stand a triple scrutiny. Will it contribute to victory? Will it help to make a better America? Will it help to make a better world?"
5. "The Library Demonstration Bill," *ALA Bulletin* 40 (May 1946): 157-159; Emily Taft Douglas, "Rural Libraries in America," *ALA Bulletin* 40 (September 1946): 269-272 [address to Second General Session, American Library Association annual conference, Buffalo, June 18, 1946]. For an extended discussion, see Douglas Raber, *Librarianship and Legitimacy: The Ideology of the Public Library Inquiry* (Westport, Conn., 1997).
6. Leslie I. Poste, "The Public Library Inquiry," *Library Journal* 74 (1 September 1949): 1162.
7. Emily Miller Danton, "Public Library War Information Centers," *ALA Bulletin* 36 (August 1942): 501; Ralph A. Beals, "Public Libraries and the War," *ALA Bulletin* 36 (August 1942): 476-479; "Chairmen of ALA War Service Committees," *ALA Bulletin* 36 (April 1942): 230. For further biographical information on Beals, see Jesse Shera, "Beals, Ralph Albert (1899-1954)," in *Dictionary of American Library Biography* (Littleton, Colo., 1978), 17-20.
8. "Chicago University Experiment Develops into Great Books Foundation," *Library Journal* 72 (15 June 1947): 916.
9. "Richmond Conference," *Library Journal* 61 (15 June 1936): 491. Minutes of the Order and Book Selection Round Table reported by W. T. Purdum, Secretary.
10. "The New York Public Library Launches Great Books Program," *Library Journal* 72 (1 September 1947): 1174. Beals claimed that the first Great Books discussion in a library was held at the New York Public shortly after John Erskine first taught his course on Classics of the Western World at Columbia University.
11. "Groups Discussion of Great Books on Basic Problems 1949-1950: Announcing a Reading and Discussion Program in the New York Public Library," NYPL Archives, RG 6 Public Relations, Pro Samples 1949-1951. [hereafter Pro Samples].
12. James Gregory Bradsher, "Taking America's Heritage to the People: The Freedom Train Story," *Prologue* 17.4 (1985): 229-245; Stuart J. Little, "The Freedom Train: Citizenship and Post War Political Culture 1946-1949," *American Studies* 34 (Spring 1993): 35-68.
13. "The Freedom Train Leads to the Library," [brochure] Pro Samples 1949-1951.
14. "The American Tradition; Letters and Documents Selected by the Staff of the Manuscript Division," *Branch Library Book News* 26.2-3 (1949): 43-48.
15. Pro Samples 1949-1951, RG 6 /3-4.
16. Margaret E. Monroe, "Exploring the American Mind," *Branch Library Book News* 26.2-3 (1949): 39-40, 50-53. Monroe began her essay with the central question being debated by scholars in the newly developing interdisciplinary field of American studies:

Three hundred years of blending peoples and cultures have produced a unique character in the American people. Europeans, Orientals, South Americans look curiously at the United States to see what makes it a nation. And we, inquisitively and sometimes self-consciously, search out the essential forms that are American, the molding forces that make us a people distinct from other peoples.

For a look at how ideological issues affected the development of American Studies at Yale and elsewhere, see Michael Holzman, "The Ideological Origins of American Studies at Yale," *American Studies* 40 (Summer 1999): 71-99.

18. The library's Honor Roll of Race Relations honored African Americans and whites each year who had contributed to the betterment of race relations in America.

19. Katherine O'Brien, "American Historical Novels," *Branch Library Book News* 26.2-3 (1949): 41-42, 53.

20. Marion E. Lang, "The Distaff Side of American History," *Branch Library Book News* 26.2-3 (1949): 49.

21. Memorandum to Branch Librarians from Esther Johnston, Supervisor of Branches, 6 December 1946, NYPL Archives, RG 8 Office of Branch Libraries, Memo Scrapbook 1946. The case, *Doubleday & Co. v. New York*, 335 U.S. 848 (1948), began when four plainclothes police, acting on a tip from the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, raided four Doubleday Book Shops in Manhattan. The Court of Special Sessions of the City of New York found that the book violated the New York State obscenity statute. The Appellate Division of the New York Supreme Court, the New York Court of Appeals, and the Supreme Court of the United States upheld this decision. The beginning and end of the saga are reported at "Police Here Seize Book as Obscene; 4 Doubleday Shops Entered in Vice Society's Action against 'Memoirs of Hecate County'," *New York Times*, 9 July 1946, 19; "High Court Backs New York Book Ban; State Ruling Is Upheld on the Obscenity of 'Memoirs of Hecate County'," *New York Times*, 26 October 1948, 33. Announced without an opinion, the Supreme Court's 4 to 4 tie vote let stand the state court conviction.

22. David K. Berninghausen, "Ban of the Nation," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 23 (September 1948): 20-21; David K. Berninghausen, "The Case of the Nation," *The American Scholar* 19 (January 1950): 44-55.

23. Benjamin Fine, "Library Association Asks Support for Fight against Various Forms of Censorship," *New York Times*, 20 June 1948, sec. 4, p. 9; "Library Bill of Rights," *ALA Bulletin* 42 (July-August 1948): 285. For a history of ALA's policy on intellectual freedom during this period, see Louise S. Robbins, *Censorship and the American Library: The American Library Association's Response to Threats to Intellectual Freedom* (Westport, Conn., 1996).

24. Mildred V. D. Mathews, "Exploring the American Idea," *Library Journal* 76 (1951): 985.

25. Preliminary Report, Committee on American Tradition, NYPL Archives, RG 6 Director's Office, CD American Heritage, Box 30. [Hereafter CD American Heritage] The committee name varied from American tradition to American idea or heritage. In addition to Mildred Mathews, committee members included Robert Henderson, chief of the Main Reading Room, Loda Hopkins, librarian of the 96th Street Branch, Gerald McDonald, head of the American History Division, and Lilian Wilson, librarian of the Bronx Reference Center.

26. Report, Committee on American Tradition. 3 May 1950, CD American Heritage.

27. The brochure announcing the fall 1950 organization of experimental reading and discussion groups on the theme of "Exploring the American Idea" included a partial list of readings. Before publishing the final list, Beals hoped to convene a symposium of outside lay people and library staff for a general review of the projected program. Declining Mathews's suggestion that he approve the titles, he wrote, "A determination of the list should rest primarily in the hands of your committee not mine." Although Beals and Mathews each suggested possible participants, including Judge Learned Hand and *Saturday Review* editor Norman Cousins, and Beals drafted an invitation, the symposium was not convened. Mathews to Beals, 19 June 1950, CD American Heritage; "Draft of Letter to Be Sent to Persons on Attached List," Ralph A. Beals, Director, CD American Heritage. A penciled note indicates "not sent." The program went ahead relying on the experience of the library in group reading and discussion and the judgment of its librarians on appropriate readings. While such an outside group might have warned against undertaking such a program in the chilling political climate, it might have also questioned the omission of any works by women or African Americans from the proposed reading list.

28. "Group Discussion of Books 1950-1951" [Brochure] Pro Samples 1949-1951.

29. CD American Heritage, [Exploring the American Idea 1950-51 Table of Contents, List of Readings, Discussion Guide]. See also, "The Library Leads to Learning," *Branch Library Book News* 27.7 (September 1950): 91.

30. "Group Discussion of Books 1950-51."

31. Mathews, "Exploring the American Idea," 987-988.
32. Fletcher to Cory, 13 July 1951, American Library Association Archives, Executive Board and Executive Director, Grace T. Stevenson Papers, 2/4/21, Box 1, University of Illinois. [Hereafter ALA Archives 2/4/21]
33. *Ibid.* Interestingly, given the origin of the NYPL project, Ralph Ellsworth strongly opposed the Great Books method, writing in a marginal note on a copy of Fletcher's letter, "Stay away from Great Books technique—Ellsworth."
34. "Four Year Goals; Statement of Policy Adopted by Council, January 31, 1948," *ALA Bulletin* 42 (March 1948): 121-122. "The Great Issues," *The Booklist* 44 (August 1948): 397-422. Book lists included: "How Much World Government?" "Inflation and Deflation," "Labor-Management Relations," "Civil Rights," and "U.S.-Russian Relations." The list on U.S.-Russian Relations was prepared by Dr. Avrahm Yarmolinsky, Chief of the Slavonic Division, and Margaret E. Monroe, Assistant Readers' Adviser, at the New York Public Library.
35. For Lester Asheim's evaluation, see "Response to the Great Issues Program," *ALA Bulletin* 44 (July-August 1950): 285-289.
36. Grace Thomas Stevenson, "ALA American Heritage Project Report to Council," January 1952, ALA Archives, 2/4/21, American Heritage Project Reports 1951-1955.
37. Henry Steele Commager, ed. *Living Ideas in America*, (New York, 1951). Ellsworth had resisted Harper's choice of Commager as editor, but his book proved useful, and Commager became an active participant in the American Heritage Project. Margaret Monroe reported that when Senator Joseph McCarthy charged that Commager was a Communist, ALA dealt with these "startling defamations" by ignoring them. Neil Jumonville's intellectual history of Commager, *Henry Steele Commager: Midcentury Liberalism and the History of the Present*, (Chapel Hill, 1999) does not mention Commager's connection with the American Heritage Project.
38. Gerald W. Johnson, *This American People* (New York, 1951).
39. The volumes making this case most strongly were Bernard Berelson, *The Library's Public* (New York, 1949) and the Inquiry's summary volume, Robert D. Leigh, *The Public Library in the United States: The General Report of the Public Library Inquiry* (New York, 1950).
40. Benjamin Fine, "Education in Review: Film Discussion Groups Are Carrying Out a Novel Experiment in Adult Education," *New York Times*, 30 March 1952, sec. 4, p. 11. In 1951 the Fund also sponsored the Experimental Film Discussion Project to test films, along with specially prepared essays and guides, as the basis of adult discussion groups. Some libraries participated in this film project, using Encyclopaedia Britannica films on "American Statesmen" to discuss the theme "Great Men and Great Issues in Our American Heritage."
41. "Group Discussion of Books 1951-1952. Announcing Reading and Discussion Programs in The New York Public Library." Pro Samples 1949-1951.
42. Pro Samples, 1949-1952.
43. Cory to Clift, 29 August 1952, CD American Heritage. American Heritage Funds also enabled NYPL to undertake its first public circulation of films, although necessarily limited for the present to films on American heritage themes.
44. Report 1951-1952 [responding to undated memorandum to all supervisors of American Heritage Programs from Grace Stevenson], NYPL Archives, RG 8 Branch Libraries, Office of Adult Services, Annual/Monthly Reports, 1951-52. [Hereafter cited, Office of Adult Services, Report 1951-52]
45. Annual Report Readers' Adviser's Office and Office of Adult Services, July 1, 1952-June 30, 1953 [Submitted by Mildred V. D. Mathews, Superintendent of Adult Services, dated 24 June 1953], Office of Adult Services. [Hereafter Office of Adult Services, Annual Report 1952-53]
46. *Ibid.*, Insertion, 8.
47. Office of Adult Services, Annual Report 1951-52, 4.
48. Beals to Clift, 26 May 1952, CD American Heritage.
49. *Ibid.*, 4.
50. Office of Adult Services, Annual Report, 1952-53.
51. "Exploring the American Idea in Chinese," Office of Adult Services, Annual Report 1952-53.
52. The New York Public Library Adult Group Specialist Report 1953-1954, Office of Adult Services.
53. *Ibid.*, 2.