Research Note

Antebellum Libraries in Richmond and New Orleans and the Search for the Practices and Preferences of "Real" Readers

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The Virginia Historical Society, in Richmond, and the New Orleans Public Library both house extensive borrowing records from antebellum libraries once based in those two cities. At the Virginia Historical Society, three dusty ledgers list the names of Richmond Library Company (and Mercantile Association) patrons and the titles of the books they borrowed from 1839 to 1860.[1] In New Orleans, the microfilmed borrowing records of the Lyceum and Library Society contain the names and the reading histories for hundreds of New Orleans readers who visited the library from 1854 to 1867.[2] Despite the details in these ledgers—thousands of book titles and hundreds of names—these two antebellum institutions neither have been the subject of detailed scholarship nor have their records been widely used in studies of reading history.[3]

For the scholar interested in discovering "real" readers, such library borrowing records represent excellent, if largely untapped, sources for interdisciplinary work on reading and intellectual history. A few scholars, of course, have drawn on library borrowing records in studies of particular reading communities: a chapter in Ronald Zboray's *A Fictive People* analyzes the borrowing habits of men and women who visited the New York Society Library in the

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1850s, and Christine Pawley's *Reading on the Middle Border* uses the records from Sage Library in Osage, Iowa, to recreate the reading practices of late-nineteenth-century Midwesterners.[4] But the neglected records from the Richmond and New Orleans libraries suggest the extent to which library borrowing records are generally under-used, sources that might shed light on the experience of reading, the reception of particular authors, and the influence of particular books on communities of readers.

In my analysis of the Richmond and New Orleans circulating records, carried out in the context of a larger project on Walter Scott's popularity in nineteenth-century America,[5] I have been able to establish the borrowing patterns of people who read Scott's novels. My research, though, also allows me to speculate more broadly on the complicated relationship between library borrowing records and reading history. Library history has tended to focus on institutional histories of various libraries, not on the agency of those people who have used libraries, borrowing from a library's collection to suit their own interests. The detailed records from two Southern antebellum libraries reveal the preferences of "real" readers and lead me to two conclusions, one about reading history and one about library history. First, borrowing records, perhaps more than any other source, enable scholars to determine the pace at which patrons read, the "curriculum" of reading they fashioned for themselves, and the likelihood that patrons who borrowed a book one day and returned it the next read silently to themselves. Second, these records expose a tension between the aims of the library and the uses to which the patron put the library's collections: borrowers did not always play along with the founding principles of an institution nor did they follow the design outlined in catalogues. Library history, then needs to consider the experience of borrowers which, in drawing on a library's collections to create their own world of books, tell us not what the library *intended* to become but what it in fact *did* become for real readers.

"Real" Readers and Library Borrowing Records

One of the important challenges faced by History-of-the-Book scholars is how to determine the experiences and practices of "real" readers. In Robert Darnton's "communications circuit," which he outlines in "What is the History of Books?", readers both end and begin the cycle: readers consume the literary products created by the writer, publisher, and printer, but these acts of consumption in turn influence the decisions publishers and writers make about future publications.[6] In "Literary Economics and Literary History," William Charvat, like Darnton, urges literary critics to consider the responses of actual readers to particular texts: "Literary history has been much too busy trying to prove that past writers shouted loud enough to be heard by posterity. We should be more interested in knowing how far their voices carried in their own generation, and—equally important—whether their generation talked back."[7] To highlight the reader's role in shaping literary history, Charvat argues, for example, that the

reactions of lyceum audiences to Emerson's early speeches forced him to write more coherent lectures.[8] Like publishers and editors, Charvat suggests, readers influence the literary works that authors create. He admits, however, that it is extraordinarily difficult to find evidence of readers talking back to writers of their own generation. Difficult as it might be to *hear* readers, studying the practices of "real" readers helps us to understand important components of the book trade; these readers are, we must acknowledge, authors' audiences, publishers' markets, booksellers' customers, and libraries' patrons. Without readers, there would be no book trade.

Until recently, literary scholars have tended to approach the study of readers and reading in abstract ways. Literary critics wrote about ideal readers and suggested that each text imagines a reader who will understand all the complexities of a particular literary work. In the 1970s and 1980s, reader-response theories challenged the New Critical position that texts have a self-contained meaning. Work by Jane Tompkins, Stanley Fish, and others argued that the reader's process of understanding the text makes meaning; therefore, because interpretations differ depending on who is reading, the meaning of a text cannot be fixed.[9] Meaning or literary value, in this view, does not reside in a text but rather in readers' responses to that text. Even though this theory marked a shift in how literary critics interpreted texts, reader-response theory did not lead to an investigation of *historical* communities of readers; it produced new theories about texts but not a picture of readers, new insights about interpretive practices but not new knowledge about the actual readers who engaged in such practices.

Admittedly, it is challenging to find these historical or "real" readers. In *Readers in History: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response*, James L. Machor writes that

> what remains elusive finally is a clear sense of what the actual reading experiences were for the numerous nineteenth-century readers whose encounters with literature took place, not in public forums, but alone in the bedrooms of middle-class homes in suburban Boston, or in barn lofts in rural Virginia, or between stolen moments of leisure at factory workbenches in Pittsburgh and Chicago.[10]

Finding out the experiences of real readers in Boston, Virginia, and Chicago has been hindered by a lack of sources. In general, librarians and archivists have not preserved the evidence that illuminates the encounters of ordinary readers with texts. The libraries of many famous authors or figures have been preserved intact, but libraries belonging to unknown people have more often been dispersed.[11] Many libraries have also discarded circulating records or marked-up books (full of marginalia), considered "imperfect" and less valuable than books left unmarked. For a historian of reading, though, such lists of circulating records (as I

have suggested) and imperfect books offer evidence of readers' involvement in particular books.

Nonetheless, recent scholarship by Janice Radway, Cathy N. Davidson, William J. Gilmore, and Ronald and Mary Zboray, among others, has turned our attention to real readers. These critics take seriously the readers who rapidly consumed romances, penned marginalia in *Charlotte Temple*, and found solace in books during Vermont's cold winters.[12] Using the marginalia in books, interviews with real readers, readers' diaries, commonplace books, library borrowing records, and subscription records, scholars have begun to find evidence of readers' engagement with books. Important to this scholarship is the notion that readers help us understand the place of literature in a particular community. Studies of "real" readers, therefore, allow us to understand how acts of reading shape lives, but, in turn, this scholarship also helps us learn how various nineteenth-century literary institutions (libraries, bookstores, publishing houses) affected reading practices.[13]

What do we know already about the place of books and reading in antebellum culture? The scholarship on antebellum print culture underscores the rapid expansion in the publishing industry that produced an abundance of books for American consumption. Whereas eighteenth-century publishers imported selected books from Britain, publishers in the nineteenth century printed many more books in the United States. For their part, readers had access to more books, and some readers, especially upper-class women who were relieved of some domestic responsibilities in the home, had more leisure time in which to read. For both men and women, reading became an important means of forging community. Research by Ronald and Mary Zboray, for example, describes the ways in which books connected readers to particular communities or were integrated into work lives: women read aloud while sewing or cooking and both men and women read while working in factories.[14] Antebellum middle-class Americans also participated in the new expansion of reading, gathering regularly for parlor social hours to read books aloud.[15] For them and other Americans who now read devotional writings less often and secular works more regularly, reading became a kind of entertainment.[16] Reading gave people something to talk about and eased the tedium of work.

Circulating records from antebellum libraries help us explore the experiences of these elusive "real" readers and "real" reading practices in a few different ways. On the most basic level, these records tell us what people read—or at least intended to read—thus announcing which books were popular and when they were most popular. As Christine Pawley's work has shown, borrowing records also allow us to recreate various "sub-communities" of readers—school friends, families, religious groups, and so on—as we trace the records of friends or siblings who borrowed similar books.[17] Perhaps most important, though, library borrowing records help us gauge, with some precision, people's reading patterns: when a patron checked out a particular book, how long a patron held on to it, and what the patron borrowed next.

The reading patterns that I discovered in the Richmond and New Orleans library records complicate the thesis that by the nineteenth century people always read "extensively," covering a wide range of books and authors. The historian Rolf Engelsing has argued that during the early modern period people read "intensively" and focused solely on one or two texts, which they read over and over again. By the eighteenth century, readings practices had begun to become more extensive as readers began to move more quickly through a whole range of books. David Hall develops a similar argument about American literary culture in "The Uses of Literacy in New England, 1600-1850," showing that, by the nineteenth century, Americans had access to many more books and read more widely than they had earlier.[18] According to the Richmond and New Orleans records, though, readers combined intensive and extensive approaches to reading. Although the most avid readers borrowed a wide variety of books, they had not entirely abandoned intensive reading practices.[19] Many readers borrowed four or five Scott novels in a row, sometimes keeping a title for only two or three days before coming back to borrow another one. They also checked out many of the same Waverley Novels more than once. These patrons read several titles, but they had become "intensive" readers of Scott.

Even though circulating records reveal patterns of reading and promise excellent access to those hard-to-find "real" readers of literary history (those same readers, I should add, who have often been absent from library history), these records also pose challenges for the historian of reading. The most obvious problem is that we cannot tell whether the person who borrowed a book actually read it. As Simon Eliot points out in his introduction to the "Reading Experience Database" on the web, "to own, buy, borrow or steal a book is no proof of wishing to read it let alone proof of having read it."[20] We also do not know what happens to books when they leave a library—whether the "real" reader whose name is in the borrowing ledger is the same person who actually read (or intended to read) the book. Finally, borrowing ledgers do not voice the responses of readers; unlike marginalia or the diaries that Ronald and Mary Zboray have studied, library borrowing records do not illuminate readers' responses to the works they borrowed.[21] Nonetheless, library patrons are important agents in library history, and the evidence left behind in old ledgers is a testament to how they appropriated library collections for themselves.

The Richmond Library Company and the New Orleans Library Society and Lyceum

Patrons, of course, borrow books within particular institutional structures, within particular library cultures. They enter a library building, flip through a catalogue (or browse shelves), and perhaps speak with a librarian before determining which books to check out. Rules and guidelines also attempt to shape the experience a patron might have in a library. Like other libraries from the period, the Richmond Library Company and Lyceum and Library Society took

time to outline guidelines for proper library behavior and rationales for the collections these libraries had built. Usually civic-minded and lofty in their goals, these institutions articulated aims for the role their libraries would play in the community and, in the case of the Richmond Library Company, developed a hierarchy for the books included on their shelves.

The Richmond library sought to improve the cultural life of the city, although the institution itself often struggled financially. Opened as the Mercantile Association in 1839, the library became the Richmond Library Company in 1844, because the Association had run a deficit and needed the revenue that new subscribers would bring.[22] At this time, the library attempted to bring together "all classes of citizens in its support" by forming the library company.[23] (The Richmond Library Company, a social library, depended on the support of subscribers and stockholders for its cash.)[24] By 1849, though, the library had gone into debt again; in the early 1850s, the city came to the rescue and began to allocate funds for its support, which helped the institution to thrive. In an effort to rally support for the library, an 1849 broadside announced the importance of the library to the city:

> The people in Richmond are not wanting in city pride, nor in expressions of it. The general credit of every city of any consequence, demands that it should be provided with all those conveniences, appliances and resources which are appropriate to its rank and importance; and by a proper and spasmodic exercise of liberality and enterprise on the part of a people, they may impart to their city an honorable reputation for such things far in advance of its size and population.[25]

In its various incarnations as Mercantile Association and Richmond Library Company, this antebellum library attempted to boost the status and resources of the city and, perhaps not surprisingly, attracted many of the town's wealthy patrons, including lawyers, judges, doctors, professors, and merchants as subscribers and stockholders.

Founded for the students of the public schools in Municipality No. 2, the Lyceum and Library Society in New Orleans was part of the lyceum movement in America and thus endeavored to provide its patrons not only with books but also with other educational opportunities, in the form of lectures. The library served students, of course, and also their teachers, and various life members and members of the board of directors. The ordinance proclaiming the new library, published in the 1858 catalogue, dates back to December 3, 1844, though the library did not open its doors until 1846 and most of the existing records are from the 1850s and 1860s. In this ordinance, the rules for funding the library and for using the building are stringently set forth. Students were to pay up to 25 cents each month, or $3 per year, in order to use the library and would become

life members after using the library for three years or paying $9 (whichever came first). While the spending priority, according to the ordinance, was books ("the sum of five thousand dollars shall be paid into the Treasury, to the credit of said Society, and shall be invested by the Directors in books"[26]), the Lyceum and Library Society also promised that

> when ten thousand dollars shall have been invested in books, at least one half of the annual income thereafter, shall be applied to purchasing such chemical and philosophical apparatus as may be necessary to aid in imparting a knowledge of the natural sciences; and for obtaining during eight months of each year, able professors, to lecture weekly on such branches of useful knowledge as may be determined on by the Directors; Provided, That the lecture rooms of the Lyceum shall never be used for any religious or political discussions, and that no person shall be allowed to lecture therein, without the consent of the Directors previously obtained.[27]

Books received promises of funding before professors or equipment, but the plans articulated in the library's 1844 ordinance makes clear that this institution valued sciences and branches of "useful knowledge." As an agency of culture, the Lyceum and Library Society hoped to form students' minds not only with books but also with lectures determined useful by the directors.

Both institutions published catalogues of their collections in the 1850s, and, like the broadsides and ordinances characterizing each library's aims, these catalogues reveal the institutions' values, and, particularly in the case of the Richmond Library Company, how and why they prized particular books. Like all cataloguing systems, the Richmond Library Company's and Lyceum and Library Society's catalogues organize knowledge and in so doing emphasize the relative importance of the various books held by these libraries. For the Richmond Library Company, both a manuscript catalogue (perhaps from the 1840s?) and a published catalogue (1855) describe the reading material available, which included a range of fiction, history, and politics.[28] The design of this 1855 catalogue, according to the cataloguer, Henry B. Michard, was meant to model the development of a "civilization."

> Whether we consider the importance everywhere attributed to the subject of religion or the fact that according to all the accounts we have the origin of every people is coincident with the establishment of religion; it is natural to assign it the first place. As the next step that is taken in the progress of civilization is the formation of the State and making laws, but following out the same analogy, the second place would be for Poli-

> tics and Jurisprudence, covering the whole ground of Legislative, Executive, & Judicial action and international relations. Sciences and arts grow out of the establishment of the state and mark its advance in power and prosperity. The analogy already adopted requires then that the next place be allotted to this division. Next the Literature and Belles Lettres [,] marking the period of the greatest prosperity of a state[,] their place comes next in succession.[29]

This letter suggests both the range of reading matter the library catalogued but also how the librarians regarded its mission: readers were to receive an education in the history of culture when they turned the pages of the catalogue or browsed the shelves. Ranking categories of books—religion occupies first place and law and jurisprudence take second place—Michard's catalogue relegates "Literature and Belles Lettres" to the back of the catalogue. Fiction perhaps represented the height of "prosperity" in any given civilization, but these titles were not given priority within the catalogue's pages.

The Lyceum and Library Society also published catalogues in the 1850s but took a more practical approach to organizing its collection. The Society published two catalogues in 1858, one describing the general contents of the library and the second listing the holdings in the juvenile library. The library also collected French-language books, and a manuscript volume including titles lists of these books in detail. Unlike the Richmond Library Company's catalogue, however, the Lyceum and Library Society's 1858 catalogue of English works and its manuscript catalogue of French books depend purely on alphabetical organization, forgoing any design meant to evoke the "development of civilization." At the beginning of the catalogue, the index lists subjects—arts, belles lettres, dictionaries, foreign works, history, law, medicine, science, statistics, and theology and religion—and, in most categories, a list of the authors (not titles) is included under each heading. (In the case of belles lettres, foreign works, and history, the catalogue omits authors' names and instead details place and time period covered by the books.) The manuscript catalogue of French works also proceeds alphabetically but emphasizes subjects rather than authors. Finally, published at the same time as the main library catalogue, the juvenile library catalogue is more chaotically arranged than either the French catalogue or the main catalogue, lumping all books together and listing them alphabetically by author. Like the ordinance proclaiming that the library should both spend money on books and on resources to promote "useful knowledge," the catalogue itself aims to be useful and practical for its readers. In the process, its alphabetical organization ends up, perhaps inadvertently, giving priority to arts and belles lettres.

Regardless of the status accorded fiction in each catalogue, both the Richmond Library Company and Lyceum and Library Society stocked a fair amount

of novels, including works by Charles Dickens, Susan Warner, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, William Makepeace Thackeray, James Fenimore Cooper, Maria Edgeworth, Washington Irving, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, James Kirke Paulding, and, of course, Walter Scott.[30] Both libraries also housed several works of history including Agnes Strickland's *Lives of the Queens of England*, William Mitford's *The History of Greece*, and Thomas Babington Macaulay's *The History of England*. The Richmond Library Company housed 4,000 titles by 1860, and a full 28 pages of its 1855 catalogue list works of history while nine pages are devoted to fiction. The Lyceum and Library Society had a collection of 10,000 volumes, and devoted 12 pages each of its 1858 catalogue to history and to fiction. The longer section of historical works in the Richmond Library Company's catalogue might owe to the bibliographical citations (publisher, date of publication, place of publication, and so on) included for each title. In any case, these works of fiction and history listed in the catalogues also fill the pages of the libraries' manuscript borrowing ledgers, especially for those readers who became avid readers of Walter Scott.

Manuscript borrowing ledgers record which books listed in the libraries' published catalogues actually circulated among readers: they record how readers used the books on the shelves. The volumes of borrowing ledgers for both the Richmond Library Company and Lyceum and Library Society list the borrowers' names, the titles or accession numbers of the books they borrowed, the dates the books were borrowed, and the dates returned. In the Richmond Library Company ledgers, a note about the patron's status, as either subscriber or stockholder, follows a name. While this information is not directly recorded in the Lyceum and Library Society's borrowing ledgers, the names of life members, board directors, and teachers come first in the ledger and the students' names follow. Ledgers for both libraries appear slightly chaotic (the Richmond Library Company's records, more so than the Lyceum and Library Society's records), as a librarian would run out of space for a particularly avid reader and would continue the entry on a half-filled page elsewhere in the book.[31]

These libraries' catalogues, ordinances, and broadsides outlined the institutions' aims, but borrowing records document the reading program that patrons outlined for themselves. These antebellum libraries, I would argue, did not necessarily succeed in promoting the kind of reading they set out to foster (reading that traced the "development of civilization" or led to the acquisition of "useful knowledge"); their collections did, though, shape patrons' reading in perhaps unintended ways. By giving readers easy access to one author's oeuvre, for not much money ($3 a year, in both Richmond and New Orleans), libraries supplied readers with fiction that they could read quickly at home, knowing as they were reading that another work by the same author could be easily found on the libraries' shelves. That these two libraries stocked all the works by Scott, Edgeworth, Cooper, and Jane Austen, among others, allowed readers to become hooked on a particular writer and to race through every title that writer had

published. Whereas an antebellum bookstore, of course, charged for individual books, libraries gave readers access to them at a fixed rate. These library's circulating records thus have led me to speculate that the rapid pace at which library patrons read fiction indicates that they were reading to themselves, not aloud, and that the long list of titles by a single author listed under borrowers' names reveals that these patrons often read one author intensively.

Richmond and New Orleans Libraries and the Practices of Real Readers

My conclusion that patrons focused on one author and most likely read silently stems from my research on readers of Walter Scott.[32] I have, however, also discovered similar patterns for readers of Edgeworth and Cooper (and, to a lesser extent, Austen). Patrons borrowed several novels by Scott in a row, as well as batches of novels by Cooper and Edgeworth, and they read through many volumes of fiction quite rapidly (they sometimes also read volumes of history with similar speed). Because many readers in my sample, as I will detail below, borrowed four or five Scott novels during a two to three week period, I feel more certain that these borrowers read the books, simply because they kept coming back for works by the same author. The intensity with which readers approached reading Scott, Edgeworth, Cooper, among others, suggests that these libraries' comprehensive holdings in fiction and history enabled readers to become dedicated to one author or one historical subject. The Richmond Library Company and the Lyceum and Library Society in New Orleans may not have encouraged readers to study civilization's development or advances in sciences, but the libraries did encourage their patrons, albeit inadvertently, to come back again and again to check out books by the same author.[33]

Both the New Orleans and Richmond circulating records reveal distinct patterns about how patrons read Walter Scott and other historical fiction. Benjamin Cochran's charge records exemplify the pattern I discovered throughout the borrowing records. On June 21, 1848, Cochran, a Richmond Library Company subscriber, borrowed *Waverley* and then returned it three days later, when he checked *Guy Mannering*. He kept *Guy Mannering* until July 5th and upon returning it, borrowed *The Antiquary*. The pattern continued. Every week until August 18th Cochran borrowed a Waverley novel—reading not only the novels mentioned above, but also *Rob Roy*, the first three series of *Tales of My Landlord*, *Ivanhoe*, and *The Monastery*. For the whole summer, Cochran borrowed only Scott novels; he did not check out other books or periodicals from the library. But then on August 25, 1848, he abandoned the Waverley Novels in favor of Edgeworth. Between September 4 and January 15, 1849, he read nine volumes of Edgweorth's works. Cochran's focused, systematic reading pattern suggests both that he read the novels and that he focused on one author.[34] His wife, Amanda Cochran, also read Scott, as well as Cooper, intensively, if less systematically than Benjamin Cochran. From March until May of 1853, Amanda

Cochran read *Waverley*, *Ivanhoe*, *Keniwlorth*, *Peveril of the Peak*, and *Guy Mannering*. Over the course of three years, she also managed to read 21 works by Cooper. While Benjamin Cochran read in a perhaps more orderly way, both Cochrans singled out particular authors from the library's collection and read these authors with great intensity.

The Cochrans were not unusual in their reading habits. Many other Richmond Library Company patrons become equally absorbed in books by one author. John Dooley, a stockholder in the library, read 17 Scott novels during a five-year period. Even though his reading stretched over several years, he did read some of the novels quickly: he raced through *Peveril of the Peak*, *The Pirate*, and *The Betrothed* in two weeks in the spring of 1854. For the next two months, his reading consisted of Cooper novels—*The Red Rover*, *The Water-Witch*, *The Pioneers*, *The Deerslayer*, and *The Spy*. Dr. T. R. Harrison, also a library stockholder, read several of Scott's novels, including *The Talisman, Quentin Durward*, *The Monastery*, *The Abbot, Guy Mannering,* and *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* bewteen April 6 and August 28, 1852.[35] Harrison did not read as quickly as some other readers, but he nonetheless focused most of his reading on one author. These patrons demonstrated their devotion to particular writers, coming back to the library several times to read yet one more book by the same writer whom they had been reading for weeks.

Similar reading patterns emerge in the New Orleans records. The dates in this ledger are more difficult to determine, but in the mid-1850s Albert Greene read a series of Cooper's works in a short period of time. On April 21, he borrowed *Pathfinder*; he returned on April 26 to borrow *The Deerslayer*. Then between April 29 and May 30, he read *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Prairie*, *The Spy*, *The Pilot*, *The Water Witch*, *The Red Rover,* and *The Two Admirals*.[36] On November 11, 1856, Richard Bein borrowed Walter Scott's *Guy Mannering*; on November 17th, he borrowed *Waverley*. Then between December 1, 1856, and February 28, 1857, Bein borrowed (and presumably read) Scott's *Redgauntlet*, *The Abbot*, *Woodstock, The Betrothed*, *Quentin Durward*, *St. Ronan's Well*, *Ivanhoe*, *Antiquary*, *Kenilworth*, *Old Mortality,* and *Rob Roy*, checking out books by no other author during this three month period.[37] In 1861, Julia Benedict, read Scott's novels steadily, interspersing her reading of his novels with *Harper's Magazine* and *Robinson Crusoe*. Between April 3rd and August 19th, she read *The Fortunes of Nigel*, *Anne of Geierstein*, *St. Ronan's Well*, *Chronicles of the Canongate*, *Redgauntlet*, *Count Robert of Paris*, *The Abbot*, *The Monastery*, and *Waverley*.[38]

But Scott was not the only writer who inspired such dedication. The New Orleans reader Frederick Ames, between July 6th and August 17th, devoted his reading entirely to Jane Austen, checking out *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Northanger Abbey*, one right after the other.[39] Albert Collings read Dickens with similar intensity, he borrowed *Dombey and Son* on December 30, 1856, *David Copperfield* on January 16, 1857, *Martin*

Chuzzlewit on January 26th, and *Oliver Twist* on February 12th. By the summer, though, he turned to Scott, reading three novels in a row.[40] Some New Orleans readers also read works of history with similar intensity. Also in 1856, M. G. Beck, for example, borrowed 11 volumes of *Roman History*, reading them in order, between September 16th and December 4th. The following year, he read three volumes of the *History of Ancient Europe* and four volumes of Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, again in order.[41] At the Lyceum and Library Society, readers found a small selection of writers included in the library's collection and read those writers intensively. The library's 10,000 volumes and its promised emphasis on "useful knowledge" did not determine patrons' borrowing habits; instead, these readers looked to the library as a place that guaranteed them a steady and certain supply of works by one writer.

As the evidence I have cited above suggests, many patrons read long, complicated novels within a short period of time, and this has led me to speculate that they did not read aloud in family gatherings, but instead read privately. For example, the Richmond Library Company patron Dr. Edward Fisher borrowed *Peveril of the Peak* for only two days and *The Betrothed* and *Waverley* for the same four days. B. B. Minor checked out *Waverley* one day and returned it to the Richmond Library Company the next. Henry Spiller Place, a Richmond patron in the 1850s, borrowed 18 Waverley Novels over the course of year. Place ended up borrowing six novels one day and returning the next.[42] (Perhaps he did not like the novels he returned quickly, but more likely, considering the amount of Scott he borrowed in a little over a year, he read each one quickly and returned to the library right away for another one.) In New Orleans, readers also moved quickly through the novels they borrowed: William Herriday kept *The Spy* for two days, *The Red Rover* for four days, and *The Prairie* for three.[43] The pace at which patrons borrowed novels suggest that they must have read to themselves, because readers would have needed several days, even weeks, to read these two- and three-volume novels aloud to gatherings.

Conclusion

We cannot hear these Richmond and New Orleans readers "talking back" (as William Charvat asks us to), as they walked through the doors of the Richmond Library Company and the Lyceum and Library Society, week after week over the course of years, to borrow books. But circulating records do document how patrons used libraries and demonstrate, quite clearly, that many patrons discovered a corner in a library's collection, stayed there, and read books by one writer intensively before moving on to another author's works. I would argue that the Richmond and New Orleans libraries inadvertently cultivated such absorption by offering readers the promise of so many books by one author—Scott, Edgeworth, Dickens, Cooper, Austen—in one place and for a fixed amount of money. In my sample, patrons did not read according to the plans set forward

by the boards of directors of these institutions; they did not read to boost the status of the city, model the development of civilization, or promote useful knowledge. Neither did patrons seem to take their cues from the organization of the libraries' catalogues. Instead, many patrons returned to the same library over and over, drawing on the institution's extensive resources to nurture a new passion for reading one author or reading about one historical subject. We may not have patrons' words but we do have a record of patrons' reading preferences and practices. So the records do, in a fashion, allow readers to speak: they testify to patrons' agency in shaping their own reading experiences through the practice of visiting antebellum libraries.

Notes

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1. The Virginia Historical Society has preserved several documents relating to the Richmond Library Company (1839-1860), including three ledgers listing books borrowed and returned, a manuscript catalogue, cash books, a published catalogue, business correspondence, and minutes of meetings. The library began as the Mercantile Association in 1839 and became the Richmond Library Company in 1844.

2. The Lyceum and Library Society records, housed in City Archives of the New Orleans Public Library, include three volumes of borrowing records (1854-1867), register of members (1872-1881), inventory of books (1870), catalogue of French works owned by the library (1854), and two published catalogues, the 124-page *Catalogue of the Library of the Lyceum and Library Society* (1858) and the 22-page *Catalogue of the Juvenile Library of the Lyceum and Library Society* (1858). Only pre-1861 materials have been microfilmed.

3. For a brief history of the Richmond Library Company, see E. Lee Shepard, "Two Early Libraries of Richmond," *The Richmond Quarterly* (Summer 1981): 48-52.

4. See Ronald Zboray's chapter "Gender and Boundlessness in Reading Patters" in *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York, 1993), 156-179 and Christine Pawley, *Reading on the Middle Border: The Culture of Print in Late-Nineteenth-Century Osage, Iowa* (Amherst, Mass., 2001), especially pages 61-116.

5. Emily B. Todd, "The Transatlantic Context: Walter Scott and Nineteenth-Century American Literary History," Unpublished dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1999.

6. Robert Darnton, "What is the History of Books?" in *Reading in America: Literature & Social History*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson (Baltimore, 1989) 27-52.

7. William Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship in America*, ed. Matthew Bruccoli (1968; Amherst, Mass., 1992), 283-297; quotation appears on pages 283-284.

8. William Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship in America*, 296-297.

9. For a helpful overview of reader-response scholarship see Jane Tompkins, ed. *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore, 1980).

10. James L. Machor, ed. *Readers in History: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response* (Baltimore, 1993), xxi.

11. The Thomas Dowse library at the Massachusetts Historical Society is an excellent example of a library belonging to an upper-class Bostonian that has been preserved in its entirety. It now fills an entire room on the second floor of the Massachusetts Historical Society; Dowse owned first editions of the Waverley Novels, which he had bound uniformly.

12. See Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York, 1986); William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835* (Knoxville, 1989); Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, 1984); and Ronald J. Zboray

and Mary Saracino Zboray, "Reading and Everyday Life in Antebellum Boston: The Diary of Daniel F. and Mary D. Child," *Libraries & Culture* 32 (Summer 1997): 285-323; "'Have You Read . . .': Real Readers and Their Responses in Antebellum Boston and Its Region," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 52 (September 1997): 139-162; "Books, Reading, and the World of Goods in Antebellum New England," *American Quarterly* 48 (December 1996): 587-622, among other articles.

13. It is important to remember, of course, that it is difficult to *learn* about historical readers. Almost everything we learn is based on inference—based on interpretations of library borrowing records, marginalia, and diary entries, for instance. "Real" readers are always constructed by book historians, based on the limited archival materials.

14. Ronald and Mary Saracino Zboray, "The Experience of Reading in Antebellum New England: Part III. Reception. Chapter 3. Habits. Section C. Allied Activities." Unpublished paper delivered at the Massachusetts Historical Society, February 4, 1999. Thanks to the Zborays for their permission to cite this unpublished work.

15. Joan Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York, 1995) 76-88.

16. William B. Warner nicely reframes the history of the novel by reminding us that it should be seen within the context of the history of entertainment. See *Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684-1750* (Berkeley, 1998).

17. Pawley, *Reading on the Middle Border*, 111-116.

18. For a summary of Rolf Engelsing's theory of reading, published in "Die Perioden der Lesergeschichte in der Nezeit: Das statistische Ausmass und die soziokulturelle Bedeutung der Lekture," *Archiv fur Geschichte des Buchwesens* 10 (1969): cols 944-1002, see Robert Darnton's "First Steps Toward a History of Reading" in *Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York, 1990), 154-187. On page 166, Darnton draws the parallel between Hall's and Engelsing's theories. See David D. Hall, "The Uses of Literacy in New England, 1600 to 1850" in *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book* (Amherst, Mass., 1996), 36-78. For another important work on the history of reading, see Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Stanford, Calif., 1994), especially pages 1-23.

19. Robert Darnton also suggests that "[r]eading did not evolve in one direction, extensiveness." See "First Steps Toward a History of Reading," 166.

20. Simon Eliot, "The Reading Experience Database; or what are we to do about the history of reading" (http:/www2.open.ac.uk/arts/RED).

21. Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray have studied extensively diaries and letters of antebellum New Englanders in order to determine these readers' experiences of reading. See, for example, their articles "Reading and Everyday Life in Antebellum Boston: The Diary of Daniel F. and Mary D. Child," *Libraries & Culture* 32 (Summer 1997): 285-323 and "'Have You Read . . .': Real Readers and Their Responses in Antebellum Boston and Its Region," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 52 (September 1997): 139-162.

22. For an overview of the library's history, see E. Lee Shepard, "Two Early Libraries of Richmond," *The Richmond Quarterly* 4 (Summer 1981): 48-52.

23. See "Statement in Behalf of the Richmond Library Company."

24. For more information on social libraries, see Jesse H. Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library: The Origins of the Public Library Movement in New England 1629-1855* (Chicago, 1949). See also Paul Kaufman, *Libraries and their Users: Collected Papers in Library History* (London, 1969), especially "The Community Library: A Chapter in English Social History," 188-228.

25. "Statement in Behalf of the Richmond Library Company."

26. *Catalogue of the Library of The Lyceum and Library Society, First District, City of New Orleans* (New Orleans, 1858), iii.

27. *Ibid.*, iii-iv.

28. For more details about the organization of the catalogue, see a letter by the library's cataloguer, Henry B. Michard, to George Nicholson Johnson, April 18, 1855, Virginia Historical Society, Mss2M5822al.

29. *Ibid.*

30. There are discrepancies between the borrowing records and the library's catalogue. For example, Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World* shows up in the borrowing records, but it is not listed in the 1855 catalogue.

31. These library borrowing records therefore differ from the ones Ronald J. Zboray analyzes in *A Fictive People*. His chapter entitled "Gender and Boundlessness in Reading Patterns," though, is a model for my work in this paper.

32. I do not analyze the possible reasons for Scott's particular popularity in the South here, because I am more interested in discussing how to use these library records to illuminate reading practices. For more on Scott in the South, please see Grace Warren Landrum, "Sir Walter Scott and His Literary Rivals in the Old South," *American Literature* 2 (November 1930): 256-276. G. Harrison Orians, "Walter Scott, Mark Twain, and the Civil War," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 40

(Autumn 1941): 342-359, and Rollin G. Osterweis, *Romanticism and Nationalism in the Old South* (1949; Baton Rouge, 1967) 48-49. In *Rethinking the South: Essays in Intellectual History* (Baltimore, 1988), Michael O'Brien argues that the detailed research needed to accurately determine Scott's reception in the South simply has not been done (53). The evidence I supply here begins to give such evidence, but more systematic work will need to be done to understand the nature of Scott's popularity in the South.

33. For a full study of the Richmond Library Company patrons' reading of Scott, please see my article, "Walter Scott and the Nineteenth-Century American Literary Marketplace: Antebellum Richmond Readers and the Collected Editions of the Waverley Novels" *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 93 (December 1999): 495-517. At the Virginia Historical Society, I sampled the records of over 250 readers from the span of the library's history, and I recorded the titles of the novels by Scott, Edgeworth, and Cooper, and I also recorded the titles of the books and periodicals patrons borrowed before and after Scott.). I sampled the records of all the women who borrowed books during this period. My sample for the Lyceum and Library Society in New Orleans was smaller (about 40 readers). In my study of the Richmond library, I recorded the number of transactions for each reader, the titles of each work by Scott, Cooper, and Edgeworth borrowed, the books or periodicals readers borrowed before and after Scott, and the dates the books were checked out and returned. My goal was to discover not only how many people read Scott and which novels they read, but also to think about what led them to Scott and which books they turned to after Scott. After spending time with the records, I also became interested in the pattern I detected in my research. All of this information is now on an Excel database. Finally, I should note that in *A Fictive People*, Ronald J. Zboray mentions parenthetically that patrons of the New York Society Library in his sample read Cooper in clusters (170).

34. Benjamin Cochran, 1848, Richmond Library Company borrowing records, Virginia Historical Society.

35. John Dooley, 1848-1856, 444, and T. R. Harrison, 1850-1853, 3, Richmond Library Company borrowing records, Virginia Historical Society.

36. Albert Greene, 1850s, Lyceum and Library Society borrowing records, New Orleans Public Library.

37. Richard Bein, 1856, Lyceum and Library Society borrowing records, New Orleans Public Library.

38. Julia Benedict, 1860, Lyceum and Library Society borrowing records, New Orleans Public Library.

39. Frederick Ames, [1856], Lyceum and Library Society borrowing records, New Orleans Public Library.

40. Albert Collings, [1856], Lyceum and Library Society borrowing records, New Orleans Public Library.

41. M. G. Beck, 1856, Lyceum and Library Society borrowing records, New Orleans Public Library.

42. Edward Fisher, 1852, 255; B. B. Minor, 1849-1852, 259; Henry Spiller Place, 1853-1855; Richmond Library Company borrowing records, Virginia Historical Society.

43. William Herriday, [1850s], Lyceum and Library Society, New Orleans Public Library.