A HISTORY OF
THE GROLIER CLUB LIBRARY

Founded in 1884 by Robert Hoe and eight colleagues to promote the "arts pertaining to the production of books," the Grolier Club of New York is America's oldest bibliophile society. The Club's namesake is the great French collector Jean Grolier de Servières (1489 or 90–1565), known for his patronage of Renaissance printers, for the fine bindings he commissioned, and for a generous habit of sharing his books with friends. The Grolier is a unique mix of private club and not-for-profit cultural institution, and its international membership of over 700 members (collectors, librarians, book designers, and antiquarian book dealers) have always taken an active role in the Club's mission to promote the book arts through exhibitions, publications, and—most significantly—an expansive research library on the history of books and printing.

Establishing a library was not among the primary goals of the Club's founding members. The aims of the Club as set out in its constitution were to be achieved through the publication of finely printed books, and through exhibitions, meetings and lectures. Yet some sort of reference collection (at the very least) must have been in the minds of the founders, as witnessed by the Grolier's first Yearbook (1884), which lists among the officers A. W. Drake as Librarian. 

By the time the Grolier issued its second Yearbook in 1887 the idea had developed further with the formation of a Library Committee, its purpose being "to gather together for the use of the members all the standard bibliographical works, as well as books relating to the art of printing."

An initial appeal for donations had been issued by Librarian Beverly Chew in 1887: "Without particular effort a fair beginning has been made towards a collection of books bearing on the special aims and objects of the Club.... Unfortunately the funds at the disposal of the Council are not sufficiently large to allow of frequent appropriations for the purchase..."
of books, and therefore the Library Committee... have determined to make this statement to the members, and to appeal to them for voluntary gifts of either books or money.” The “List of Books Wanted” included with the appeal included Brunet’s *Manuel du libraire*, Blades’ *The Enemies of Books*, Bignone & Wyman’s *Bibliography of Printing*, and Uzanne’s *La Reliure moderne*, as well as fifteen priced book auction catalogues. By December 1887 the appeal had brought in $525 in donations, and the Library stood at 300 volumes, including 154 volumes of bibliography; fifty volumes of printing, typography, and the lives of famous printers; nine volumes of engraving and etching; eight volumes of book binding; and forty-six priced catalogues—a bounty increased soon afterwards by a set of woodcuts donated by members of the American Society of Wood Engravers.

This growing hoard threatened to overwhelm the few bookshelves in the Club’s suite of rented rooms at 64 Madison Avenue. The Madison Avenue building was home to the Mott Memorial Library, a seldom-used collection of medical texts brought together by distinguished New York surgeon Dr. Valentine Mott (1785–1865). The structure sheltered a number of homeless organizations, and in addition to the fledgling Grolier Club, it housed in the mid-1880s a ladies’ fencing school, the Society of Mechanical Engineers, and a kindergarten. The Mott medical collection left little room for the Grolier Club’s own books, and the steadily growing accumulation of bibliographies, catalogues, and prints undoubtedly influenced the Grolier’s decision in 1890 to construct a building of its own.

The first purpose-built home of the Grolier Club still survives at 29 East 32nd Street, a robust Romanesque revival structure in buff brick designed by New York architect Charles W. Romeyn (1854–1942). A sunny, south-facing room on the third floor was designated...
as the Library, but by 1892 Librarian Beverly Chew was lamenting that "the shelf room in the Library has been entirely filled up, and to provide for further growth the Council has authorized the immediate arrangement of the rear room of the same floor as an annex to the Library proper, and it seems likely that at no distant day the whole top story of our building will be devoted to our books." No distant day, indeed: in 1892 Richard Hoe Lawrence took over as Librarian, and during his thirteen-year tenure the Library grew at an alarming rate.

A side-by-side comparison of two sketches of the Library published in 1894 with two photographs of the same rooms taken in 1899 show how quickly and thoroughly books took over the new building. The 1894 drawings (of the front and rear Library rooms, respectively) show a good many books, but they know their place, and there is ample space for prints and other bric-a-brac. But in the 1899 photos, note the encroachment: in the front Library room, a bookcase has replaced a writing desk, and the staircase landing, which is unencumbered in the earlier drawing, seems in the later photograph to have been pressed into service as storage for folios.

A more ominous change is apparent in the rear Library room, where extra tiers of shelves have been added above the original bookcases, and even over the fireplace.

By the mid-1880s what was originally intended as a modest reference library for the Club's bibliophile membership had begun to take on the character of a research collection, and become an important focus for member donations. Useful reference material predominated in these donations but in the early years of the Grolier Club, before the establishment of rival libraries like the Pierpont Morgan Library, the Club also routinely reported significant gifts of rare books and prints. Samuel Putnam Avery (1822–1904), collector, print dealer, and founding Grolier member, was from the first a major benefactor. Between 1884 and his death twenty years later he ensured that the Club had all the newest bibliographies, as well as fine specimens from his own collections of early
Kent had been a member of Melvil Dewey's first class at the newly-founded Columbia School of Library Service, and the scheme he developed with Lawrence owes much to the Dewey Decimal System. First published in 1901, and revised and expanded in 1910, the Kent-Lawrence system is still used by the Club today, and has been adopted by other similar specialized collections, notably the St. Bride Printing Library in London."

In 1890, upon moving into 29 East 32nd Street, the Grolier Club Library consisted of about 300 volumes. By 1893 the collection had grown tenfold to almost 3,000 volumes, and by 1899 to more than 5,000 volumes. At the turn of the new century, the Club could claim that it possessed, by the standards of the time, "nearly every important authority on typography, bibliography, bookbinding and bookplates," as well as a respectable collection of over 300 prints, alone valued at nearly $6,000. In response to periodic appeals, member donations to the Library continued strong, and as early as 1899 worries began to surface again at the rapid rate of growth.

In 1910 Grolier President Havemeyer's annual report stated that the "Council has in mind the need of a new Club House.... Our Library is overflowing its shelves, and the danger from fire is ever present, but we hope that the ingenuity of our Librarian will take printing, bindings, and prints. Following Avery's example, in 1894 David Wolfe Bruce, of the Bruce family of New York typefounders, donated a library of several hundred books illustrating (or discussing) fine printing and typography, including 94 examples of incunabula.

Until now the post of Grolier Club Librarian had been filled by a series of prominent collectors; faced with maintaining a collection growing rapidly in size and complexity, the Council in 1900 appointed for the first time a professional caretaker, Henry Watson Kent. He served for three years under Richard Hoe Lawrence as Assistant Librarian, and in 1903 was named Librarian. One of his first tasks was to develop a classification scheme for the Library.