

John L. Stephens

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Books & People

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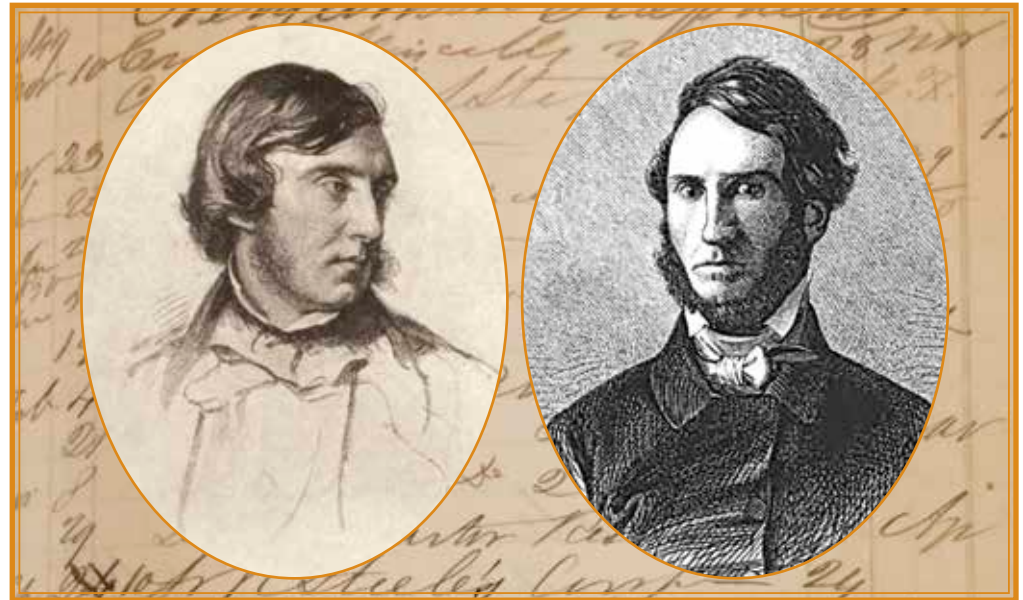


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Adventuring East: Travels of Two 19th-Century Library Members

by Harriet Shapiro, Head of Exhibitions

For centuries American and European travelers have ventured beyond the familiar boundaries of the West in search of the mythical East. Among the wave of nineteenth-century tourists who sailed to the Levant were New York Society Library members John L. Stephens (right) and George W. Curtis (left). *City Readers*, the Library's digital collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century circulation records, reveals that travel books were popular among early members. But Stephens and Curtis had other plans in mind. They were determined to experience the Orient not from the Victorian confines of the Library, but first-hand.

Both men were seized by what Rose Macaulay describes as "ruin fever," a passion for ancient cities and monuments shared by many American and European travelers to the Middle East. Lengthy pilgrimages on camel-back had nothing in common with the conventional Grand Tour of Europe and Greece; that *rite de passage* undertaken by the well-heeled ended in Greece, the outer frontier of the Western world. Like other voyagers into the unknown, Stephens and Curtis returned home to write up accounts of their adventures.

Greetings from the Head Librarian

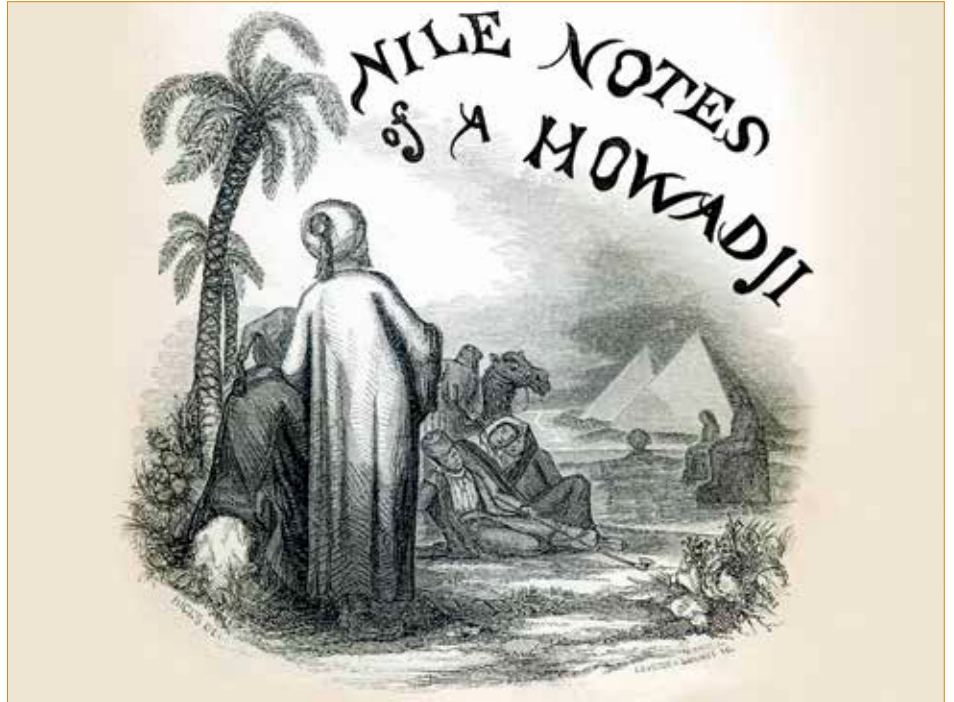


The past few months have been some of the most confusing and troubling in recent history. If, like me, you found yourself searching for information and needing to connect with others to make sense of the world, then the Library is surely your refuge. In libraries, citadels of literature and history and defenders of facts, you can find the information you need to answer life's questions; pick up books, take workshops and attend lectures both to enlighten and to entertain; take comfort in a convivial environment; and, not least, commune with your neighbors.

We heard you when you told us that you wanted more opportunities to meet your fellow members. In January we began rolling out a tea trolley every weekday from 3:00 to 3:30 PM in the Reference Room. If you haven't already taken advantage of this mid-afternoon break, please do stop by and join us over a cup of coffee or tea and a cookie. Make no mistake, the New York Society Library is a society—an open, inclusive community of readers, writers, and families all connected by our love of the written word. And our society will be waiting to welcome you.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Carolyn Waters'.

Carolyn Waters, Head Librarian



Illustrated title page from George W. Curtis' narrative of his travels through Egypt. *Howadji* means *traveller* in Arabic.

Based on his travels of the early 1840s, John L. Stephens is known to posterity as a distinguished archaeologist of Mayan ruins in the Yucatan. In 1834, he was a twenty-nine-year-old lawyer at the New York City firm of George W. Strong. (Strong was the father of diarist George Templeton Strong, also a Library member.) Suffering from a protracted throat infection, Stephens had been encouraged by his doctor to travel, the nineteenth-century antidote for over-worked constitutions. He took passage on the packet ship *Charlemagne*, bound for England. From London he worked his way south to France and Italy, where he climbed Mount Vesuvius hoping to improve his health. His head “humming with Homer and Herodotus,” he turned east towards Greece, then continued to Smyrna, to Constantinople, and in time north to Russia and Poland. By December 1835 he had reached Egypt. According to historian Andrew Oliver, it was on a boat trip up the Nile that Stephens questioned fellow travelers about the best route through the desert to the ancient Nabatean city of Petra, located in today's Jordan. Only a few Europeans had attempted the dangerous route through the Arabian desert to the rose-red city. Stephens would be the first American.

Disguised as a respectable Cairo merchant in a long red silk gown, white trousers, red shoes, and a pair of Turkish pistols tucked into his belt, Stephens vanished into the Arabian desert. He was accompanied by an experienced camel driver and his servant, Paolo, also in Arab dress. “I am about to cross a dreary waste of land,” he wrote in a letter home, “to pitch my tent wherever the setting sun might find me.” Stephens' first view of the Nabatean temple façade of El Khazneh (the Treasury) proved a momentous experience. In *Incidents of Travel in Egypt, Arabia Petraea, and the Holy Land*, he writes that “the first view of that superb façade must produce an effect which could never pass away. Even now, that I have returned to the pursuits and thought-engrossing



El Khazneh in Petra from Léon de Laborde's *Journey through Arabia Petraea*.

incidents of a life in the busiest city of the world...I see before me the façade of that temple; neither the Colosseum at Rome...nor the ruins of the Acropolis at Athens, nor the Pyramids, nor the mighty temples of the Nile, are so often present to my memory." While there, Stephens inscribed his name on the back wall of the temple alongside those of earlier adventurers including Léon, marquis de Laborde, and Maurice Adolphe Linant. "I confess," Stephens recalled, "that I felt what, I trust, was not an inexcusable pride, in writing upon the innermost wall of that temple the name of an American citizen."

The following year Herman Melville observed Stephens at a Unitarian church service in New York City. In *Redburn*, Melville describes Stephens as "that wonderful Arabian Traveller...For I very well remembered staring at a man myself...who had been in Stony Arabia, and passed through strange adventures there, all of which with my own eyes I had read in the book which he wrote, an arid-looking book in a pale yellow cover." That arid-looking book was warmly received by Edgar Allan Poe, who gave it twelve pages in the *New-York Review*. It remained in print until 1882.

George William Curtis was born in 1824. As an impressionable young man, he spent the summers of 1842 and 1843 at Brook Farm, heart of the Transcendentalist reform movement. Its spiritual head, Ralph Waldo Emerson, described it as "a perpetual picnic, a French Revolution in small, an Age of Reason in a patty pan." Curtis' moral fervor and Victorian probity, learned in the nursery of Brook Farm, accompanied him throughout his lifetime as a writer, orator, and passionate abolitionist.

Armed with a loan from his father and eager to fulfill his boyish dreams, Curtis set sail for Marseilles in August 1846 on the packet ship *Nebraska*. It was, he wrote, the "magic voyage over the summer sea." The first three winters abroad

Meet Barbara Bieck, Special Collections Librarian



Photo by Harriet Shapiro

Barbara with the *Nuremberg Chronicle*

In January, we welcomed Barbara Bieck as our new Special Collections Librarian. Barbara came to us from the Grolier Club, where she worked since 2012, first as a library assistant and then as a librarian; her responsibilities have included cataloging, reference, and overseeing the reading room. She has also been an intern at the New York Public Library and at the law library of Columbia University. She received her MLS from Pratt Institute and her undergraduate degree from SUNY Albany.

Barbara is an active member of the Security Committee for the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section, under a division of the American Library Association, and is also a member of the Metropolitan New York Library Council and the New York City Digital Humanities group. She is excited to bring her experiences to the Library and be a steward for the collections.

Barbara's passions lie in the arts and humanities; she enjoys studying illuminated manuscripts, medieval culture, and rare books. She spends her free time rambling through the latest museum exhibitions, hiking around Prospect Park, and sailing along the Hudson. She is happy to join the Library's staff and looks forward to meeting members!



Library circulation ledger pages for Curtis and Stephens; right, Curtis' *The Howadji in Syria*, with MacWhirter on the cover.

were spent in Europe, the fourth in Egypt and Palestine. During his years away, Curtis kept a diary, sending his impressions home in a series of letters to the *Courier and Enquirer*. He took in the Egyptian pyramids, the Dead Sea, the bazaars of Damascus, the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, and the “melting eyes” of an Armenian girl named Khadra. Of the post-Crusades Christians he met in the East he wrote, “You are disappointed by what you see of that faith there, as you would be upon approaching a banquet of wit and beauty, to find it a festival of idiots and the insane.” Though not a tough adventurer like Stephens, he persevered, carried into the fabled Orient of his imagination on the back of his camel, MacWhirter.

When Curtis reached the Roman ruins of Baalbec, he captured its beauty with prose that foreshadowed his distinguished career as an orator. “Listen for the last time in Syria for the sounds which have long died away into the dumbness of antiquity, and you shall hear the hum of this city of Solomon, the great point of the highway from Tyre to India, when Zenobia’s Palmyra was but a watering-station in the desert. Then nearer, the clang of Roman arms and trumpets, the scream of the eagles of Augustus, and the peal

of religious pomp around a temple dedicated to Jupiter, and ranking among the wonders of the world.”

Curtis’ books about his travels, *Nile Notes* and *The Howadji in Syria*, were agreeably if not enthusiastically received. George Templeton Strong noted in a March 1851 entry that “there are elaborate affectations and conceits in every other paragraph [of *Nile Notes*] that obscure the man’s meaning.” Strong also chided Curtis for “a kind of euphemistic obscenity or puppy-lewdness.” Curtis’ father, who had funded the journey, objected to the depiction of dancing girls. The son insisted that the outcry was “ludicrous.” But soon enough the furor and Curtis’ youthful dreams of the Orient subsided. Back in New York, he gained gravitas as he launched into an active career as a public speaker and journalist, writing for *Putnam’s Magazine* and *Harper’s Weekly*. He was a Republican and a staunch supporter of African American equality through the dark years of the Civil War until his death in 1892. Columbia University offers an annual prize for oratory in his name.

Broken Beauty: Ruins of the Ancient World is open to the public in the Peluso Family Exhibition Gallery through August 31, 2017.

Meet Carol Collins Malone



I am both delighted and proud to become the Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Library. Libraries have always held a special attraction for me. My professional pursuits—international banking and later clinical psychology—have allowed me to pursue my love of books both here and abroad. When my family and I returned to New York in 2007 after nearly 20 years in Ireland and England, Trustee Emerita Lyn Chase re-introduced me to the Library. Within a year or so I became more involved, joining the Lecture & Exhibition Committee, then the Board.

My psychology doctoral dissertation, on Maurice Sendak and the role of his books and those of other authors in helping young children overcome their anxieties, was an opportunity to study children's literature and illustration. When my own children were young and we lived in Dublin I studied children's and young adult literature with Robert Dunbar, the champion of excellence in that field, and I wrote for *INIS*, the literary magazine of the Children's Literature Association of Ireland. By this time, studying and working in libraries had become indispensable to me. After our family moved from Dublin to London in 1996, I became a member of the London Library, another well-loved membership library, and was fortunate to obtain scholars' privileges at the extraordinary National Art Library at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

I joined the Society Library eleven years ago. I don't know what I would do without it. As a volunteer tour guide at the Metropolitan Museum, I have found our Library's resources invaluable as I have researched and written a variety of tours, most recently on Tibetan Buddhism and Nepalese sculpture. I have enjoyed the Library's borrowing privileges for books and CDs but also the use of our e-resources—circulating e-books, *Zinio's* magazines, JSTOR, Oxford Art Online, *The New York Review of Books*, and *The London Review of Books*, to mention just a few, as well as access to a wealth of historical newspapers.

I am proud of the work of the Lecture & Exhibition Committee, which I chaired 2013-2016. We have produced many fine lecture programs and, more recently, we have staged nearly half a dozen theatrical productions written and performed by emerging female artists. The Library is grateful to several patrons, most especially to Alexander Sanger, not only for funding these events, but also for helping emerging female artists take their projects onward to the next stage of development.

What am I borrowing this month? *The Marvels* by Brian Selznick, for sheer power of illustration, and *Casanova* by trustee Laurence Bergreen, for its lively narrative.

Next on my list: *Thank You for Being Late* by Tom Friedman. My favorite authors tend to be British and female: Penelope Lively, Jane Gardam, and Ruth Rendell. They share clear-eyed powers of observation and a gift for irony.

As the new Chair, I am thinking hard about the future of the Library. Increasingly, members use the Library as a place to work. We all spend more time on our electronic devices. This trend has created greater need for affiliation with others—in order to share ideas, to foster professional networks or to make friendships. How to adapt to meet these and other needs of our members continues to be a particular focus for the Board of Trustees. Two of my personal goals are to maintain good communication with our patrons and to meet members. Another objective is to ensure our financial strength, which is a pre-condition for future endeavors. I strongly encourage each of you to use the collections, to spend time in our handsome building, and to continue to let me and the Board of Trustees know what you love about the Library and what you would like to gain from your membership.

A Special Donor Reception

Those who donated \$1,000 or more in 2016 were invited to a special reception on January 23rd. Dr. Elizabeth L. Bradley, author of *Knickerbocker: The Myth Behind New York* and editor of the Penguin Classics edition of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow and Other Stories* shared remarks about Washington Irving, a life-long Library member and Trustee from 1835 to 1837.



Left to right: Top: Jeanine and Roland Plottel; David De Weese and Anne Heller; Bill and Penny Bardel; Louise Duncan and Julie Ann Hall; Fleur Fairman and Tim Wallach; Laurence Bergreen and Ellen Feldman; Dr. Elizabeth Bradley

New Members Party

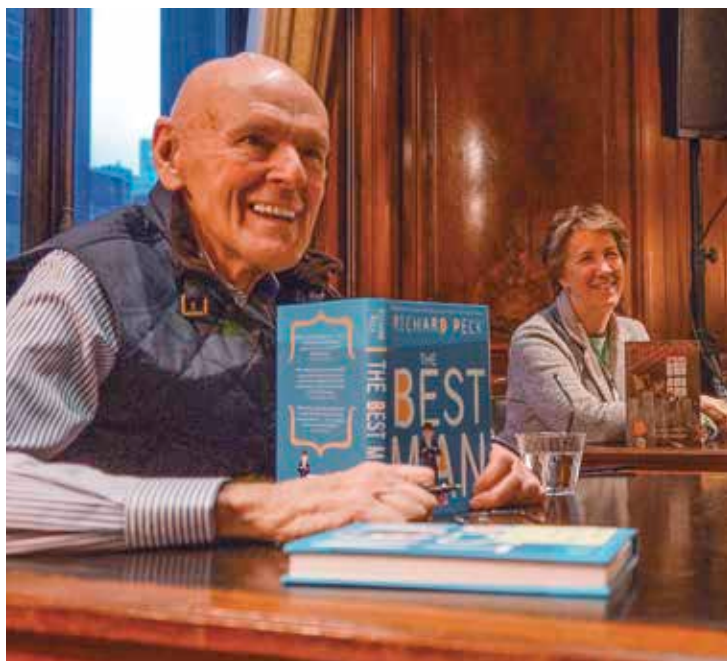
Members who joined since the June 2016 New Members Party were welcomed to the Library at a reception on December 5th.



Left to right: Top: Bruce and Rosemary Harris, Jacqueline and Bruce Merzon; Lorrie Bodger and Travis Dorsey; Susan Robbins, Laura Lattman and Frances Greathead; Jenny Bright, Carolyn Waters and Bill Bardel; Helene Brenkman, Grazia d'Annunzio, Carol Collins Malone, Ruth Meyler, and Melissa Rosati; Marsha Jacobson and Tim Wallach

Children's and Young Adult Events

In November award-winning member author and illustrator Chris Raschka shared his newest work and also collaborated with his young audience to paint a group story. An exceptional event with longtime member authors Richard Peck and Elizabeth Winthrop followed in early December. They shared the stage to discuss their books, the secrets of authors, and their writing lives. The first event of 2017 came with the return of author Yona Zeldis McDonough who shared an interactive presentation on her new book, *The Bicycle Spy*.



Left to right: Top: Richard Peck and Elizabeth Winthrop sign their books. Young members create a story with Chris Raschka. Yona Zeldis McDonough signs copies of *The Bicycle Spy*. Members are captivated by the secrets of the trade that Peck and Winthrop reveal.

YA Authors in Conversation: Libba Bray & David Levithan

The talented school librarian, reviewer, and blogger Jennifer Hubert Swan moderated the discussion. The conversation focused on literature, the quirks of being an author, and the effect current events have on writing for teens.



Left to right: Top: Jennifer Hubert Swan poses with Libba Bray and David Levithan. The authors with some of their teen fans. The audience enjoys the lively discussion. The authors in conversation. If you missed your chance to buy these books, you can find them on our shelves, either in stack 9 or the Young Adult-High School shelf in our lobby.

Sarah's Legacy



Planned gifts are a wonderful way to ensure that the New York Society Library continues to thrive and serve future generations. By including the Library in your estate plan, you can play a vital role in helping to ensure its long-term financial stability.

In 2010, we created the Goodhue Society, a legacy group to honor those who inform us that they are making a bequest to the Library. In the first year there were 20 inaugural members; today there are 76.

The Society is named for Sarah Parker Goodhue (1828-1913) who made a remarkable gift to the Library in 1917. Her \$600,000 bequest provided the core of our present endowment and made possible the acquisition, renovation, and decoration of the building we all love today. It also

included family portraits, china, statues, rare books, furniture, and autographed letters from George Washington and other luminaries, many of which were on display in our recent exhibition. The bronze plaque in the Library's entry hall commemorates her generosity.

Goodhue Society members are honored each year at a spring reception and lecture. Our next celebration is scheduled for April 26. They are also recognized in a special section of the Annual Report and are offered two complimentary seats to all Members' Room and offsite lectures.

If you would like to join the Goodhue Society or receive more information, please contact Director of Development Joan Zimmert at 212.288.6900 x207 or jzimmert@nysoclib.org.

Every Book an Explosion

Remembering Shirley Hazzard

Ms. Hazzard with then-Head Librarian Mark Piel, 2004; Ms. Hazzard in the Members' Room, c. 2012.



Shirley Hazzard who passed away in December 2016 at the age of 85, was a beloved author who served on the Library's Board of Trustees beginning in 1974. She was named Trustee Emerita in 2013.

Ms. Hazzard's beautifully written and nuanced books range from fiction such as *The Transit of Venus* and *The Great Fire* to commentary like *Countenance of Truth: The United Nations and the Waldheim Case* and the memoir *Greene on Capri*. Her many honors include the 2003 National Book Award for *The Great Fire*. Her most recent volume is *We Need Silence To Find Out What We Think: Selected Essays*, edited by Brigitta Olubas and published by Columbia University Press earlier in 2016.

The Library is honored to have had a long association with Ms. Hazzard and her husband, Francis Steegmuller, who died in 1994. As a trustee, she served longest on the Book Committee, applying her wide-ranging literary knowledge to recommending new books for the collection and treasuring the older ones.

We were also delighted to host the first international conference about Ms. Hazzard's work in 2012, with a distinguished panel comprising Gail Jones, Jay Parini, Martin Stannard, Brigitta Olubas, and Annabel Davis-Goff. Jonathan Galassi moderated, and the evening was introduced by Consul General Phil Scanlan AM. Video of this event is available on the Library's website.

The Library celebrated Ms. Hazzard in our 2010-2011 exhibition *Literary Lives: The World of Francis Steegmuller & Shirley Hazzard*. Curator Harriet Shapiro quotes Hazzard in the exhibition catalogue:

"Whether I wake these mornings in Naples to the Mediterranean lapping the seawall or on Capri to the sight of a nobly indifferent mountain, it is never without realizing, in surprise and gratitude, that I—like Goethe, like Byron—am living in Italy." (*The Ancient Shore: Dispatches from Naples*)

At the opening of the Library's 250th anniversary year, in 2003, Ms. Hazzard said,

"Of course I regard the Library as a refuge and a treasure house. But I also regard it as a powerhouse. I think it is real life and I fear for people who miss this because they are missing a great energizing force, even something frightening. For instance, when I look at the novels of Thomas Hardy on the shelf, I fear if I see *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* that I will read it again and have to suffer so much and have to understand so much more than I am willing to understand. These things go on in libraries.

A library should be a place where you go into your own heart, into a heartland of understanding. It's also a place where you don't necessarily feel comfortable because of what you read. There may be something that you had hoped not to have to learn about. George Orwell said, "If freedom means anything, it means the right to tell people what they don't want to hear," and every good library should have a fair amount of that in it.

The book is a thing irreplaceable, not because every book is a good book or should even exist, but it is one of the best things invented by man, I would say, and these walls are full of them. A library has to be somewhere where every book can be a potential explosion."



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One More Picture



The Library was pleased to co-host an evening of humorous storytelling and comedy with Uptown at Night on January 31. From left: presenters Matthew Mercier, Carmen Maria Machado, Dorothea Benton Frank, Nancy McCabe-Kelly, Bruce Jarchow, Michael Arkin, and Sarah Fearon, with organizers Sydney LeBlanc and Mickey Murray.