The Lanier Library Association in Tryon, North Carolina is one of the few remaining active membership libraries in the United States. At a time when many public libraries are facing drastic cuts in funding, and sometimes even facing closure, it has become important to examine how such an institution as the Lanier Library can exist, and what we can learn from this resilient organization that can be applied to public libraries today. Through an examination of the history of the Lanier Library, from its beginnings in 1889 to the present day, this study seeks to identify some of the factors that allow the library to remain viable. Also considered are issues associated with implementing the Lanier Library’s user-pays model in a public library setting.

Headings:

Library Science—History
Fee-based library services
Membership libraries
MEMBERSHIP LIBRARIES: A STUDY OF THE LANIER LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

by
Tracy R Kallasy

A Master’s paper submitted to the faculty of the School of Information and Library Science of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Library Science.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina
April 2012

Approved by

Ronald E. Bergquist
Table of Contents

Introduction ............................................................................................................................... 2

Membership Libraries in History .......................................................................................... 2

The Lanier Library in History ............................................................................................... 6

The Lanier Library Today ...................................................................................................... 11

Additional Active Membership Libraries ........................................................................... 18

Membership Fees in Public Libraries .................................................................................... 20

Conclusion .............................................................................................................................. 25

Works Cited ............................................................................................................................. 26
Introduction

Membership libraries in the United States were the precursor, or the “parent,” to the public library system as we know it today (Cutter 18). These innovative organizations enjoyed many years of success before eventually being overtaken by tax supported public libraries. Today, there are fewer than twenty membership libraries that remain active in the United States (Wendorf 11). The Lanier Library Association in Tryon, North Carolina is a membership library that has managed to survive when most others like it have failed. At a time when public libraries are facing drastic cuts in funding and sometimes even facing closure, it becomes important to examine how such an institution as the Lanier Library can exist, and what we can learn from this resilient organization that can be applied to public libraries today.

Membership Libraries in History

The first membership library, the Library Company of Philadelphia, was founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1732 (Fletcher 27). Similar organizations quickly spread throughout the developing country and by 1775, each present state in the union had formed at least one membership library (Shera 54). Before the development of these subscription libraries, there were no collections of books accessible by the general public in colonial America (Wendorf 7).
Membership libraries varied in their method of organization. Some were known as proprietary libraries where, in addition to paying annual membership fees, members owned shares of the library as a corporate entity. Others were known as subscription libraries, where members paid only a subscription fee to access the collection and receive other membership benefits (Shera 58). There are no remaining libraries that follow the proprietary model in the United States today.

Following a period of stagnation during the revolutionary war and the years that immediately followed, the establishment of membership libraries in the United States again began to grow, reaching its peak in the 1830s. Soon thereafter, a period of slow decline began, and eventually membership libraries were overtaken by tax supported public libraries. There were many factors that helped contribute to the shift to public libraries. Though often immediately successful, membership libraries rarely outlasted the enthusiasm of their founders (Shera 123). While some lasted much longer, the average total lifespan for membership supported libraries was only 35 years (McMullen 214).

Though public libraries would eventually win out, membership libraries did not immediately disappear with the advent of tax supported libraries. Their decrease in number was not proportional with the increase of public libraries (McMullen 216). At the turn of the twentieth century, there was still an equal number of membership and public libraries (McMullen 216).

Membership libraries managed to survive during this time for a variety of reasons. Large cities were able to offer continued support even alongside developing public libraries because of the cities’ large number of wealthy people or the high concentration
high culture (Bolton 4). Similar in some ways to private schools, membership libraries served to separate by class distinctions. While public libraries first aimed to provide services and materials for the poor and uneducated, membership libraries provided first for their often wealthier and more highly educated members (Cutter 18). Public libraries were sometimes regarded by this higher class as “crowded and unpleasant to frequent” (Cutter 18). Membership libraries provided a more agreeable environment for those who could afford it.

Another factor that contributed to the survival of membership libraries into the early twentieth century, even as public libraries were becoming more ubiquitous, was their role as a social club (Wendorf 14). These libraries provided a social forum in a way that public libraries initially did not. They placed emphasis on activities beyond just possessing books and making them available (Wendorf 4). Original objectives of membership libraries often included providing a forum for lecture, debates, social events, recreational activities, and classes, as well as providing other educational and self-improvement opportunities (Worthington). Meetings for members provided a kind of social inclusion that public libraries didn’t necessarily offer. These organizations sponsored balls, author and artist talks, and often possessed collections of art that were perpetually on display in the libraries (McMullen 222).

Membership libraries didn’t only continue to develop and remain active in larger cities. They were still developing in smaller towns where public libraries couldn’t yet be supported by the local government. Ignorance in small communities of what a public library could provide and how one could be implemented may also have been a factor in
the continued establishment and survival of membership libraries in these smaller, usually rural towns (McMullen 222).

The successful membership library often worked alongside neighboring public libraries, becoming a “friendly rival,” and “dividing the work of supplying the book needs of the city” (Cutter 18). The membership library would sometimes act in many ways as a branch of a public library, but without receiving municipal support. When this occurred, the two libraries were able to push each other to better serve their communities through competition with one another (Cutter 19).

But early in the twentieth century, public libraries finally won out (McMullen 216). If a membership library had no endowment, there was nothing to support it financially during times of poor administration or bad economy (Bolton 4). These libraries were “directly dependent on the day to day incomes of their members” (Shera 85). When their members’ incomes decreased during times of recession, so did the library’s budget. These organizations also floundered if the administration was unable to adapt to the changing times and the shifting role of the membership library as public libraries became predominant (Fletcher 29). In his book, *Foundations of the Public Library*, Jesse Shera writes that there was an inherent “structural weakness” among membership libraries that often led to their failure (123), and that it was not the weakness of the whole, but the “weakness inherent in voluntary societies” that led to their decline (75).

Though nearly all membership libraries did eventually fail or become inherited by other institutions, these early organizations at the very least “demonstrated the need of something more than it could supply” (Fletcher 28). Public libraries were developed in
response to this demonstrated need. In many cases, the collections of membership libraries were absorbed by public libraries, with members voting to turn over their holdings and even their building to the public library (Worthington). There is no doubt that membership libraries, both directly and indirectly, contributed greatly to the development of the public library system as we know it today.

The Lanier Library in History

If the establishment of membership libraries peaked in the 1830s, and then began its slow decline and eventual replacement by public libraries, it is somewhat unexpected that the Lanier Library didn’t begin as an organization until 1889. As membership libraries were failing and being absorbed or replaced by tax supported public libraries across the country, the Lanier Library was being greeted with enthusiasm by the people of Tryon.

In 1889, Tryon was made up of just 24 houses, three stores, and a railroad depot (Stroup 2). Barbara Stroup’s book, which was published by the library marking its 100 year anniversary, *The Lanier Library 1890-1990: A Centennial Celebration*, describes the library’s beginnings: Three sisters, Mary LeDuc, Lucy LeDuc, and Elizabeth Boardman, decided that their town was in need of a library. Together with their friends Mrs. Thomas Knott and Amelia Spence, the women decided to form a club to gather support for the formation of a library in Tryon (2). These five women canvassed the small town to gather support for their club. On January 9, 1889, the first meeting of the club was held with an impressive 38 women in attendance (3). It was noted in the minutes of that first meeting
that “The ladies of Tryon have agreed to form a club to be called The Lanier Club, to meet once a week, the object of which is procure a library for the town” (3).

The club was named in honor of the poet Sidney Lanier, who spent the last months of his life in Tryon. Upon hearing that the library would be named in her late husband’s honor, Lanier’s wife donated two volumes of his poetry to the club. These volumes became the first holdings in the library’s collection (3).

In its early stages, the Lanier Club met once a week. It cost members 15 cents to join, with membership fees of an additional 15 cents due quarterly. These membership fees, along with funds collected through donations and income earned through program fees, helped to purchase a collection of books for the library (5).

On April 27, 1890, the library’s collection was made available to the public. It consisted of one bookcase that was moved frequently in the town. Originally placed in the town’s Methodist church, the bookcase also had a temporary home in the post office, and in various stores in Tryon (Stroup 4).

In addition to the collection of books that the Lanier Club now provided to members, the women also sponsored many popular social events and presentations in the town. They sponsored talks from artists or authors and presentations from scholars, as well as plays, bazaars, flower shows, and a very popular women’s exchange (Merchant and Patterson 9, 22).

Although recognition for the first bookmobile in the United States is often given to the Washington County Free Library’s service, which was implemented in 1905 (Levinson 43), recognition might instead belong to the Lanier Club, who implemented their bookmobile in 1900. The women used a horse and buggy to bring books to those
who could not travel to the library’s bookcase, and routes that couldn’t be accessed by the buggy were traveled by one club member who delivered books to members on horseback (Stroup 5).

These auspicious beginnings faced a setback when, in January 1904, the store which held the library’s bookcase caught fire. The building was destroyed and the library’s entire collection, excluding those books which were checked out at the time, was lost. Fortunately, an influx of donations and gifts made in the wake of the fire, in addition to money from an insurance policy, were more than enough to rebuild the collection to its earlier state and beyond. Additionally, the fire proved as impetus for the Lanier Club to finally move forward with long debated plans to construct their own building (Stroup 6).

On April 13, 1905, the Lanier Club incorporated, changing its name officially to the Lanier Library Association. Construction of their new building began, and the first meeting was held there on December 21, 1905 (Stroup 7). Though many additions have since been built, the library is still housed in this original building.

The women of the Lanier Library were extremely active in the community, and their activities went far beyond library business. Their original goal as set forth in their constitution placed equal emphasis on “maintain[ing] a library… and encourage[ing] civic and educational welfare in the community (Merchant and Patterson xv).” One library committee was charged with keeping the streets of Tryon clean; another completed a survey of living conditions in Polk County at the request of the State Board of Health (Merchant and Patterson 16). The women were instrumental in passing legislation to make school attendance compulsory in the county (Stroup 7), and helped
greatly in the war effort during World War I (Merchant and Patterson 24). They spread health information throughout the town on important topics about which many were ignorant, such as tuberculosis (Merchant and Patterson 6). When the club saw a need for a cemetery in the town, they not only planned and petitioned for it, but funded its upkeep (Merchant and Patterson 5). After one successful campaign to clean up and beautify the town, the Tryon Board of Trade actually asked the club for further suggestions to improve the town (Lanier 305).

The library was not only generous with its time, but quite generous with its money. The club donated money and other supplies to public libraries as they developed in the surrounding areas (Merchant and Patterson 49). They almost always agreed to provide monetary donations to various causes when asked, even when this meant neglecting their own financial interests. They contributed financially to the State Forestry Department, the Veterans Hospital, and to the State Tuberculosis Sanatorium, among many other causes and organizations (Merchant and Patterson 27).

The next major change in the library came in 1930, when members voted to extend membership to men (Stroup 9). Previously, library membership had been restricted only to women. The library was now able to be accessed anyone willing to pay the membership fee, and positions on the board were now open to men.

As the years passed, the club slowly became less involved in civic affairs and more focused on the library and its day to day operations. Since the library’s inception, other groups had formed in Tryon that took some of the pressure off of the library to improve the town in ways unrelated to the mission of the library. Many of these groups
were formed by the library’s example, or branched off from committees that the library formed (Merchant and Patterson 32).

The library had a great influence on the developing culture of the town, serving as “an anchor to Tryon’s cultural life” (Claud 1A). Some artistic or cultural groups that were formed directly by the library eventually broke off and became organizations in their own right. For example, a drama club known as Drama Fortnightly was begun by the Lanier Club but eventually became its own independent organization (Merchant and Patterson 37).

In the middle years of the twentieth century, several additions were added to the building, and the library began its endowment fund, which would eventually prove to keep the library afloat during times of economic hardship. The decision to begin this fund was made at the beginning of the depression with acknowledgment that the library’s prosperity was due largely to a series of well-timed gifts and bequests, and that as the economy worsened, those gifts would likely become more rare, or even stop altogether (Merchant and Patterson 32). Still, the library declined an offer of state aid from the North Carolina State Library, wishing to remain independent (Merchant and Patterson 40).

It was also during the middle part of the century that the library began to concern itself more with the affairs of the library than that of the community. The library’s failure to employ a trained librarian was beginning to create some problems, including crowding of shelves, an unmanageable backlog of donations, and a convoluted cataloging system that made locating materials in the library nearly impossible (Merchant and Patterson 51). In response to these issues, the library asked Elaine von Oesen, Extension Services
Librarian at the North Carolina State Library, to survey the library (Merchant and Patterson 51). The board decided to act on many of her recommendations, including the suggestion that they employ a professional library consultant. With her help, a major weeding project was undertaken, leading to the removal of several thousand items (Merchant and Patterson 52). The library also heeded the suggestion that they utilize the processing center of the North Carolina State Library to catalog books rather than continuing to rely on inexperienced, volunteer library members to undertake this endeavor in house. This arrangement proved to be both more economical and more efficient, and contributed greatly to the improved organization in the library (Merchant and Patterson 53).

Throughout the later part of the century, the library continued to grow and, by 1984, the two volumes of Sidney Lanier’s poetry that had been the library’s first holdings had grown to a collection of over 23,000 items (Stroup 61). By 1989, the library had surpassed 800 active family memberships (Stroup 79), and would continue to prosper into the next century.

The Lanier Library Today

The town of Tryon has grown up around the Lanier Library building. Originally surrounded by empty lots and forest, the library is now surrounded by homes and businesses, including a fine arts center. The town is filled with art galleries, studios, and theaters. When asked if the artistic community in Tryon has contributed to the longevity of the Lanier Library, administrator Vonda Krahn explains her view that, instead, the library itself is the reason for the existence of arts in Tryon.
According to the 2010 United States Census, Tryon has a population of only 1,646 people. The population is both older and more highly educated than the national average. The median age is 56.8, with 41.5% of residents over the age of 62. The percent of residents with at least a high school education is 86.8, with 40.7% having earned a bachelor’s degree or higher, and 17.3% with a graduate degree or higher (U.S. Census 2010).

The demographic features of Tryon make it well suited to support an organization like the Lanier Library. In contrast with the imposing and stately architecture of other membership libraries like the Boston Athenaeum and the New York Society Library, the Lanier Library has more of a cozy, homey feel. There are no elaborate shelves or marble pillars here. The building is low-ceilinged and small, with wooden bookshelves lining the walls. These shelves of books are interspersed with two working fireplaces and several windows that overlook the surrounding mountain landscape. There is plenty of comfortable seating, most of which is located in the Holden Reading Room, which was added on to the main building in 1926 (Lanier 303). The circulation desk is often adorned with fresh flowers gathered from members’ gardens, and plenty of donated art, including a bust of the library’s namesake, Sidney Lanier, decorates the walls. Another room showcases a number of antique wooden toys from the famous Tryon Toymakers, and there is a small table for child visitors to the library, perpetually occupied by a large stuffed dog.

The environment of the library is a friendly one. Workers are on a first name basis with most of the members, calling out a cheerful greeting whenever a patron enters.
Silence is discouraged in the library and, according to the library administrator, the library is regarded as a place for socializing and gossip.

The library’s mission today is to “promote and maintain literary and cultural activities and enhance its unique assets” (The Lanier Library). As of March, 2012, the library had 452 active family memberships (Krahn). The library requires an annual fee of $25 per family for membership. This fee entitles members to check out materials for a two week period, with renewal requests accepted by phone or by email. A reserve list is maintained for popular items (lanierlibrary.org).

The library’s collection totals just less than 25,000 items. The majority of these items are in print, with 22,864 standard print, periodical, or large print items. The large majority of books are fiction. There is also a very small collection of children’s books, mostly consisting of classics or extremely popular current books, such as the *Harry Potter* series.

The remainder of the library’s collection consists of audio books on CD and cassette tape, music on both these formats, and films on DVD and VHS. The vast majority of films held by the library are for entertainment rather than educational purposes.

The Lanier Library also maintains special collections, including the Sidney Lanier Collection, the Tryon Authors Collection, the Forbes Business Collection, and a collection of materials related to the state of North Carolina. The library provides internet access to members through the use of one computer. A very basic library catalog is accessible online both in the library and remotely, but a card catalog is still maintained.
for members who prefer it. According to the library administrator, the card catalog is still used just as much, if not more, than the electronic catalog (Krahn).

Materials are selected by an eight person group known as the Media Selection Committee, in conjunction with the library administrator. Selection of materials is based on the committee’s perception of member interest, permanence of interest, authority of the author or publisher, literary merit, and significance of the subject matter (lanierlib.org). Member suggestions for materials are encouraged. If the committee decides not to purchase materials suggested by members, the requesting member is informed of the decision and the reasons for it (Krahn).

The library still hosts several events and programs throughout the year, though the frequency of events sponsored by the library has faded somewhat over the years. Among these programs are monthly lectures by artists, authors, poets, musicians, or others of cultural significance. These lectures are known as the Brown Bag Lunch Program, and attendees are encouraged to bring their own meals. Events are open to both members and non-members, free of charge (Lanier Library). There are also informal book discussions which are held monthly, regular book sales, an annual spring program that features well-known entertainers or authors, and an annual children’s event that features storytellers, magicians, or other family-oriented entertainment (Krahn).

The library has experienced great success with its newly developed Sidney Lanier Annual Poetry Competition. Judged by North Carolina Poet Laureate Cathy Smith and South Carolina poet John Lane, the competition is open to adults and high school students in North and South Carolina. In its fourth year, it received a record 205 submissions, and is expected to continue to grow (Flynn 38).
The Bookmark is a newsletter produced by the library and mailed to its members. It includes recent library news, information about upcoming events and programs, a list of recent acquisitions by the library, and a list of new library members. Most of this information is also available on the library’s website. The newsletter also reminds members to renew their membership.

The library employs three part time employees, as well as a custodian. There is an administrator, an employee who works at the circulation desk, and a technical processor. The current administrator’s degree is in business administration, and no library employee has a library related degree (Krahn). The library is governed by a twelve member board of directors. Each director serves a three year term, and has the opportunity to serve two terms. The positions on the board consist of president, treasurer, secretary, membership, house and grounds, display case, publicity, media selection, finance, hospitality, special events, and administrator (Lanier Library).

Volunteers contribute their time to the library in many ways. They help with data entry and mailings, they staff committees, and they sometimes even work the circulation desk. The library has a strong pool of volunteers from which to draw whenever there is work to be done (Krahn).

Most of the library’s operating budget comes from its endowment. The library is reliant on donations and bequests for its continued existence. The nominal yearly family membership fee of $25 earns only a very small part of the library’s operating budget. Although it was raised recently from $20, the library is again considering raising the fee slightly. One reason given for the possible increase is the board’s philosophy that, if something is cheap in cost, people will think it’s not worth anything (Krahn). The
membership fee at the Lanier Library is much lower than that of most other membership libraries. The Boston Athenaeum charges $320 annually for its family membership (bostonathenaeum.org), and the New York Society Library requires a $250 annual fee for a household membership (nysoclib.org).

Requests for removal or censorship of material are not an issue in the library, and the administration has no formal strategy for dealing with these requests should one arise. The library administrator knows of not a single time that an objection has been raised about an item in the collection. This lack of complaint is not due to a lack of material that might be perceived as objectionable in the collection. A copy of the highly controversial *Little Black Sambo* sits in full display in the library’s children’s collection. The American Library Association’s list of the “Top 100 Banned and Challenged Books from 2000-2009” lists J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series as the most frequently challenged book, but the series is included in the library’s collection and hasn’t ever been challenged by members. It is difficult to further judge the balance of topics represented by the Lanier Library’s collection by this method, since the ALA’s list shows that the books that are most frequently challenged in libraries are children’s or young adult books, and the library only collects a very small number of books for these age groups, and usually only classics.

It is also important to note that the membership library does not hold the same responsibility to provide a fair and balanced collection as a public library does. Whereas a public library exists to meet the needs of everyone in a community, the membership library only exists to meet the needs of its paying members. If members do not wish to
read about one side of a topic that is controversial, it is not the responsibility of the membership library to provide books with that viewpoint (Fletcher 30).

The Lanier Library is located just four miles from the main branch of the Polk County Library system. This tax supported library provides far more services to a much larger patron base than the Lanier Library. It offers a collection of over 60,000 items, free wireless internet, a public computer lab, frequent classes, programs, and events, bookmobile services, and reference and information services from trained librarians (publib.polknc.org). When asked why patrons choose to pay for membership to the Lanier Library rather than exclusively patronizing the Polk County Library, the library administrator cites several reasons. She believes that members view the Lanier Library as a friendlier place where they can come to socialize with their friends. She states that the Lanier Library is better able to honor the wishes of its members than a public library can. She also emphasizes that the library is the only one within a 25 miles radius that is open on Sundays, a fact which is also highly emphasized in many of the library’s promotional materials (The Lanier Library).

In addition to the reasons that Krahn described, there are several factors that have allowed the Lanier Library to remain active despite the challenges such an organization faces: The library’s robust history, its friendly, quiet, and less intimidating atmosphere, the quality and nature of programs and events, the building’s location, the members’ sense of ownership of the library, and the ability of the library to more effectively meet the needs of its less varied patron base.

Because of bequests, donations, and the library’s large endowment, the library has been able to keep membership fees at a nominal amount, encouraging membership even
when one might not use the library regularly. The Lanier Library is appealing in that it is small and cozy. Many members are greeted by name as friends when they enter the building. Since most of the members are retirees (Krahn), the library is able to focus more on this group’s specific needs and desires, rather than providing for all the varying groups in a community as a public library is compelled to do. Also appealing to this group is the sense that one has stepped back in time when entering the library. The card catalog, limited computerization of the library, and the limited use of modern technology contributes to this sense. In fact, the electronic circulation system and catalog weren’t even installed until 2006. The library continued to rely only on paper records until that time (Krahn).

Despite the advantages the Lanier Library presents to some members of the community, membership has been declining. Down from its peak of nearly 1,000 members, as of March, 2012, the library sustains only 452 family memberships. Reasons for this decline could be the library’s aging membership base formed mostly of retirees, the poor state of the economy, or the failure of the library to keep up with evolving technology in both its administration and its collection.

**Additional Active Membership Libraries**

The Lanier Library is not the only membership library still active, though it is perhaps the most surprising. Most surviving membership libraries are located in large cities with a larger population from which to draw members, or they provide some sort of specialized collection. Twelve of the remaining sixteen libraries are found in major cities including three in New York City, and one each in Boston, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, San
Francisco, Providence, Newport, St Louis, San Diego and Charleston. According to its website, the Portsmouth Athenaeum serves as a library dedicated to preserving local history, as well serving as a gallery and museum (portsmouthathenaeum.org). The St Johnsbury Athenaeum in Vermont functions also as an art gallery. It possesses an impressive art collection, on which it focuses, which includes several pieces from the famous Hudson River School (stjathenaeum.org). The Lanier Library is rare in that it is both in a small town and provides a general rather than specialized collection.

In her article “Strategies for Survival: Membership Libraries in the Modern Era,” Christine Worthington discusses many ways in which membership libraries can stay viable today. As with many of the libraries discussed above, those which have general collections tend to be placed in direct competition with public libraries, while those that have specialization in a specific subject are positioned as a genuine alternative.

Additionally, some libraries save money by forgoing paid employees and relying entirely on volunteers, and some form partnerships with other libraries or organizations. The historical significance of the organization can be a marketing benefit, and extra money can be gained through renting out building space or by applying for grants for special projects. Many of these libraries rely almost entirely on endowments and bequests to supplement membership fees that account for only a very small percentage of their operating costs.

Anne Eisenberg’s article from the New York Times, “Libraries of Gracious Reading, for Members Only,” lists as an asset the elegant and historic buildings in which many membership libraries are housed. Kelly writes that the relative modesty of membership fees, usually not even coming close to recouping the libraries’ costs, is a
significant factor contributing to the longevity and continued survival of these organizations. When they are located in larger cities, these libraries also have the appeal of being smaller, faster, easier to access and far less noisy and crowded than their public counterparts.

In 1991, an organization was formed to bring together the administrators of the remaining membership libraries in the United States. This group was named the Membership Libraries Group and meets annually at a different member institution. The meetings are largely informal, and attendees spend time talking about issues relevant to membership libraries and sharing ideas (Krahn). There is a similar group in the United Kingdom, known as the Association of Independent Libraries (independentlibraries.co.uk)

**Membership Fees in Public Libraries**

The idea of implementing membership fees in public libraries in the United States is rarely discussed in modern times. When it is, the idea is usually met with indignation and vehement protests. In 2009, David Carliss, the city manager of Lawrence, Kansas suggested that a “modest membership fee” be introduced to ease the town’s reliance on property tax to fund the library’s operations. In response to the anger and criticism that immediately met this suggestion, he further explained that children and those who couldn’t afford the fee would still have open access to the library. It was still regarded by other officials in Lawrence as “a very bad idea” and “close to immoral.” Carliss didn’t publically pursue the idea any further (Lawhorn, 51).
The American Library Association is clearly against charging fees of any kind in public libraries. As stated in the ALA’s article “Public Libraries and Intellectual Freedom,” written by Gordon M. Conable, “the imposition of service charges may provide a significant economic barrier to information access. As libraries embrace automation, electronic media and connectivity, the temptation to impose fees may increase, but it should be resisted.” The article later states that “American public libraries flourish out of a commitment to the principle that knowledge and access to information empower the individual. Libraries embody the firm belief that information must not be the exclusive province of a privileged few and that it should be widely and freely available to all.”

In her article, “Membership Fees in Public Libraries,” Maryna Mews lists a number of potential issues with implementing fees in public libraries. She believes that those of limited means, students, and children should be given reduced or free memberships, but that the cost to the library in implementing and policing these varying fees would be substantial. Changes in status would have to be monitored through constant demands for patrons to provide proof of their statuses, which she claims would greatly reduce the library’s efficiency and raise operating costs substantially. She also believes that people will use others’ cards, and that family memberships would be problematic because of the loose definition of “family.” The Lanier Library does not report any of these issues as problems that they face.

Mews lists further problems including the idea that, if membership fees were not equal at all libraries, people who live in high charge areas would “raid” the low charge municipalities. Additionally, if free in house use was implemented (as is the case in most
membership libraries), she believes those who are housebound or only use the bookmobile service, for whom in house use is not an option would be strongly discriminated against.

The claims made in this article aren’t entirely baseless. However they do seem a bit alarmist in nature. In circumstances that can be compared to those at the Lanier Library, none of these problems have ever been encountered (Krahn).

In his article “User Fees: The Time Has Come to Face the Issue,” Stan Skrzeszewski comes out in favor of membership fees in public libraries. He believes that librarians, in their role as “masters of the art of exaggerated moralism” (137), are overstating the importance of providing equal access to information to all demographics of the population. In the 1985 article, he claims that there is nothing to indicate that the poor use the library, and therefore implementing membership fees would not discriminate against them. He cites statistics that the middle class are the demographic who most frequently use the library. The author claims that “by their financing and operation, public libraries actually redistribute income from the poorest to the more affluent strata of the community” (137). He believes that by charging membership fees to those who actually use the library, the middle class, it would ease the financial burden for supporting the institution away from the poor and place it on the demographic that more directly benefits from the services provided.

Public libraries in Alberta, Canada provide great insight into what can result from charging membership fees. In the 1980s, membership fees were introduced in public libraries across Alberta to combat loss of revenue from government cutbacks (Hammond 2). At that time, all public libraries in the province charged a membership fee (Mardiros,
“Public Library Membership Fees” 111). But in the year 2000, the Banff Public Library voted to become the first free public library in Alberta and eliminate its annual $10 membership fee. By the end of the year, membership there increased by 40 percent (Mardiros, “Eliminating Membership Fees” 34). Soon after, based on the success found in Banff, many other libraries in the province voted to eliminate membership fees as well (Mardiros, “Eliminating Membership Fees” 34). But as of 2007, a majority of libraries still charged users for access to library services and materials (Hammond 1). Among talk of eliminating fees in all of Alberta, the Alberta Library Trustees Association distributed a questionnaire to head librarians in the province to ascertain their opinions on the matter. 91.7% of respondents were in favor of removing fees if replacement funding was provided (Mardiros, “Librarians’ Views” 284).

Public Libraries in Alberta are governed by the Library Act of 1907, which states in no uncertain terms that all library services should be free. The free services set forth in the act are access to public library facilities, use of library resources in the library, borrowing public library resources, acquiring library resources through interlibrary loan, consultation with library staff, and/or basic information services (“Public Library Services in Alberta”). Libraries in Alberta have gotten around these requirements by claiming that they are charging for administrative costs associated with supplying the physical card (Hammond 4). This logic does not account for the fact that the charge is billed annually, without reissuance of the card, but no library has ever been challenged on the issue.

In his article, “Cash Cow: User Fees in Alberta Public Libraries,” Jason Hammond considers the reasons that the people of Alberta accept the idea of a user pays
model for library services. He believes that people support the fees because of the general political conservatism found in the province, but also because of the easy boost they provide to the libraries’ budgets, the low cost of the fees, and because paying for libraries makes people value them more (5). Some believe that charging user fees “keeps out the riff raff,” making for a more pleasant library experience for the middle and high classes (8).

The public libraries in Alberta are not supported exclusively by user fees. These fees make up only about 15% of revenue on average. The remaining 85% of the budget is supported by tax revenue. This means that, in a kind of “double taxation,” people are charged for access to a library which they have already paid for through taxes (Hammond 6).

As stated earlier, the elimination of user fees in Canadian public libraries has led to a great increase in library membership and use in those areas. Similarly, implementation of a user-pay model leads to a significant decrease in library activity. In 1994, the library system in Edmonton, Canada introduced an annual $10 membership fee. Enrollment, circulation, and library visits all immediately dropped significantly. In the years since, library use has yet to recover (Hammond 8).

Beyond some libraries charging fees for checking out certain media, such as DVDs, or charging for services like printing or copying, no public library in the United States currently charges user fees (Hammond 13). In many states, doing so would be illegal (Robinson 55). While librarians are usually vehemently opposed to the idea of charging membership fees to patrons, the general public is not as universally against the idea. A 1991 telephone poll of United States residents by the University of Illinois
showed that 44% of respondents supported implementation of user fees in their libraries in times of economic hardship, as opposed to an increase in taxes (Kinnucan, Ferguson, and Estabrook 183).

The Chapel Hill Public Library in North Carolina serves residents of Orange County. Those who live outside the county can pay an annual fee of $60 to access the library’s resources. As of March 1, 2012, there were 490 paying subscribers to the Chapel Hill Public Library. That number is higher than the entire membership of the Lanier Library. Despite the adequacy of library systems in neighboring counties, nonresidents still choose to pay for a subscription to Chapel Hill, either for convenience or for access to the perceived superiority of the Chapel Hill Public Library. There will always be those willing to pay for library services. But those willing may not be enough to support the level of service they desire, and the cost of discriminating against poorer members of a community or reluctant users of a library may be too high.

Conclusion

There is much that can be learned from the unexpected success and longevity of the Lanier Library. The ability of the library to retain members despite the membership fee and limited collection and the ability to inspire enough donations and bequests to sustain the library financially is impressive and worth emulating. Although evidence shows that the benefits of embracing a user-pays model in public libraries likely would not outweigh the detriments to library service it would cause, there are other features and practices of the library that could be embraced by public libraries. The Lanier Library is undoubtedly an institution worth remembering.
Works Cited


Lawhorn, Chad. “A Fee to Use the Public Library?” Library Administrator’s Digest 44.7 (2009): 51. Print.


