

Nichols' First Library

Prior to the Civil War, there was little need for academy libraries. The preferred teaching method for much of the 19th century was recitation of the day's lesson from a common text. Students, including those at Nichols Academy, relied almost exclusively on textbooks chosen by their instructors. Students could further their intellectual growth (and socialize) outside the classroom by participating in a student-run campus literary society where formal debates on topical issues of the day were conducted for students to hone their speaking and writing skills and to test those skills against other students. Since public speaking skills were so important in the 19th century, these societies prepared students for becoming successful professionals. Many also collected and maintained their own libraries for the use of the society's members. Such a society was present at the Academy by at least 1873, but whether it had its own library is unknown.

Thank You, Mr. Conant!

When Hezekiah Conant, Dudley native son and wealthy Rhode Island industrialist and strong proponent of education, joined the Nichols Academy Board of Trustees in 1874 the Academy consisted of two buildings: the old Universalist Meeting House, which now served as the Academy's schoolhouse, and a student boarding house. Within the schoolhouse there was apparently a circulating and reference library containing some two hundred volumes and a 'reading room' supplied with 'leading political, educational, and local papers'.

When Hezekiah Conant bought the land on which he would eventually build his new academy, his original intent was to simply grade and level it and donate it to the town as a park. This would



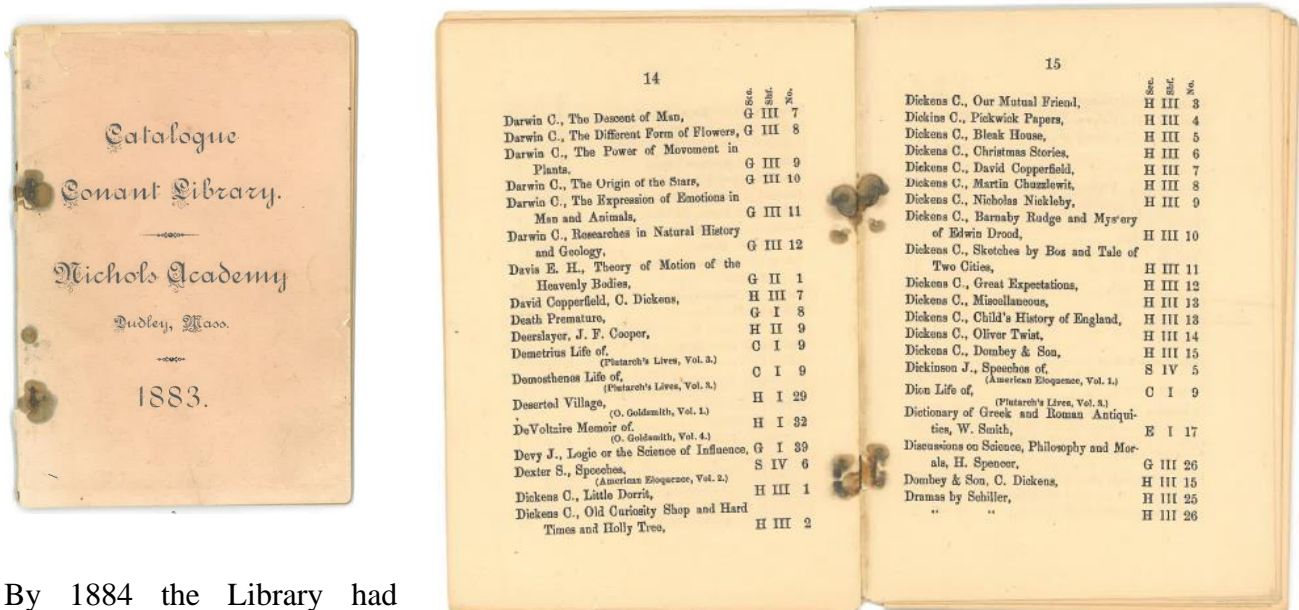
Conant Library/Observatory c. 1890

necessitate moving Universalist church/academy building which stood upon part of it but he discovered that the building was structurally unsound and would have to be demolished. In 1881 he worked out an agreement with the town to build a new academy building in return for the bricks from the old church, which he then used to build a small library and observatory a year later.

Intended For All

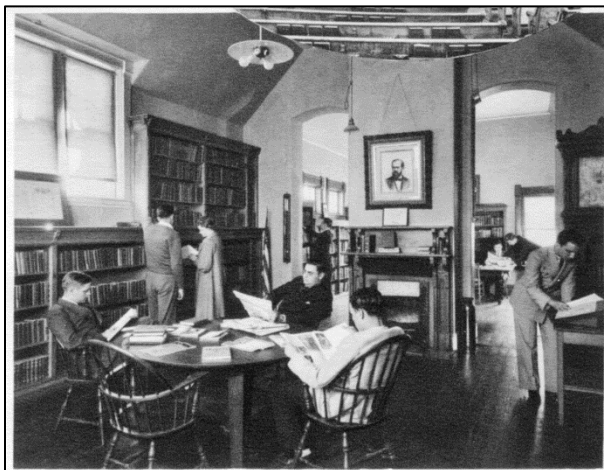
Intended for the students of the Academy as well as for the people of Dudley, the library started with 600 books and by 1883 had grown to 1,100 thanks to the continued generosity of Mr. Conant. A *Catalogue* from 1883 provides the titles as well as a Section and Shelf location. (the Dewey Decimal system was published just a few years earlier, in 1876, and the Library of Congress classification system which wouldn't be invented until 1897.) Most of the books in Library were

classics and standard treatises in philosophy, logic, and history, plus a number on scientific subjects, from evolution to electricity. Literally Darwin to Dickens.



By 1884 the Library had quickly expanded to 2,000 volumes (a few of which now reside in the Archives). The collection comprised ‘a good selection for general reading and the leading works of reference, so that no scholar need remain ignorant on any point of history or general information’.

The Library also included a reading room ‘supplied with daily, weekly and monthly publications of standard character for scientific and literary reading’.



The Academy’s *Catalogue* for 1884 noted that the rooms were open from 12 to one, four to five, and seven to nine p.m. (indicating that electrical lighting was available on the Hill by then) and that books were ‘issued’ from the Library on Wednesdays and Fridays. That same catalogue described these rooms as of the ‘pleasantest features of the school’.

Rules

Libraries, of course(?) must have rules. The Conant Library *Catalogue* for 1893 lists some of the following:

- The Library is open to all persons on the payment of one dollar and one-half yearly, invariably in advance.
- Books may be kept out two weeks, and for every day’s detention beyond that time a fine of two cents a day will be imposed.
- One work only shall be taken from the Library at a time.

- Loud talking and rude behavior in the Library Building are forbidden.

In 1890 Conant deeded to the Academy Trustees the Library/Observatory building, along with Roger Conant Hall, a boarding house (also for students and the community) that he built in 1885.

Nichols Academy closed in 1909. Its successor would open in 1931 as the Nichols Junior College of Business Administration. By 1936 the Library had some 9,500 volumes. During the late 1940s the Library was relocated to the lower extension of Academy Hall where it would remain until a new library building was constructed in the early '60s.