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ATG Interviews W. Eric Emerson

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ATG: *The Charleston Library Society was founded in 1748 and is the third oldest library in the United States. Can you tell us about the founding of the Library Society?*

EE: The Charleston Library Society was founded by seventeen young men of various backgrounds (from merchants to “esquires”) for the purpose of raising a fund to purchase publications (pamphlets, magazines and books) from London booksellers. Our founders’ intent was to bring to this colony the latest works of European authors to ensure that the colony’s children “would not grow up as savages.” By the end of 1750, the Library Society had 160 members, and the organization continued to grow in subsequent years.

ATG: *Did the Library Society help with the founding of the College of Charleston and the Charleston Museum? Can you tell us more?*

EE: In 1773 the Library Society provided the artifacts and support necessary for the founding of the Charleston Museum. In 1785 the Library Society fulfilled one of its original goals by founding the College of Charleston. The Library Society continued to shape Charleston’s cultural landscape decades later, when its members founded the South Carolina Historical Society in 1855.

ATG: *Part of the Library’s archives was sent to safekeeping during the Civil War. Can you tell us about that era of the Charleston Library Society?*

EE: Frederick Adolphus Porcher (1809-1888) became librarian pro tempore in 1854. He also was a professor at the College of Charleston. When the Civil War began, he moved part of the Library Society’s collections to the College of Charleston’s library and the more valuable items to Columbia for safekeeping. Both parts of the collections survived the devastating fires that destroyed much of Charleston (1861) and Columbia (1865). At the time, the Charleston Library Society owned and occupied the South Carolina State Bank Building at the corner of Broad and Church Streets. The building survived the Charleston Fire of 1861, but it was vandalized and its contents destroyed during the Union



occupation in 1865. After the war, Porcher spearheaded efforts to restore and rejuvenate the Library Society. He was involved in the eventual merger of the Library Society with the Apprentices and Minor’s Library, which allowed the Library Society to survive Charleston’s postwar economic depression.

ATG: *You are a private library and require a membership fee? How many private libraries still exist in the United States? Britain? Worldwide?*

EE: Today, there are sixteen membership libraries in the United States that circulate materials and rely primarily on private donations for their operations. There are twenty-eight similar institutions in Great Britain and many more worldwide.

ATG: *Can anyone become a member of the Charleston Library Society? What is required?*

EE: With few exceptions, membership in the Charleston Library Society is open to those who pay an annual membership fee and abide by rules established for the circulation of materials as set forth by the organization.

ATG: *The Charleston Library Society has received a \$70,000 grant from the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelly Foundation which will allow the Society to convert its card catalog of manuscripts, rare books, pamphlets, and visual materials to an on line catalog accessible from its Website. The Society has*

resisted making its collections remotely accessible in the past so this is a great event. When will this become available?

EE: By the end of March 2008, the Library Society will have records for all of its Special Collection materials (manuscripts, rare books, and pamphlets) available online from our Website at charlestonlibrarysociety.org. We hope to have records for all of our circulating materials available online within the next three years.

ATG: *Your collections are noteworthy. Recently, the Library Society unveiled a newspaper from 1776 that includes the first copy of the Declaration of Independence to be published in South Carolina. Can you tell us about this?*

EE: The Library Society has the foremost collection of South Carolina colonial newspapers in the world. Within that collection are issues of the *South Carolina and American General Gazette*. In 2001 we learned that a copy of the August 2-14, 1776 issue of the newspaper, which contains the first printed copy of the Declaration of Independence to be published in South Carolina, was to be auctioned by Christies in New York. We checked our copies of that newspaper and discovered that our issue was missing. We had numerous records to prove that the issue had been in our collections, and it had been used by a historian as late as 1871. We compared the marks on the issue to be auctioned with the preceding and subsequent issues found in our collections. The markings on those issues matched those found on the issue to be auctioned. Fortunately for the Library Society, the Post and Courier Foundation successfully bid for the issue and generously donated it to the Library Society on permanent loan. The Library Society intends to display the newspaper on each Independence Day in the future.

ATG: *The Charleston Library Society’s building at 164 King Street is fronted by two of the city’s largest ginkgo trees. This species represents memory and long life, and for many years the ginkgo leaf has served as the symbol of the Charleston Library Society. What plans do you have for the future?*

EE: We will continue to educate researchers and potential members about our wonderful collections and the many benefits of membership in this venerable organization. An important part of that is our ongoing effort to place records for all of our holdings in an online catalog, which can be accessed by both members and researchers. Our longterm goal is to enhance our organization’s sustainability and to ensure that the Charleston Library Society continues to shape our city’s cultural landscape for many years to come. 🌿

CHARLESTON LIBRARY SOCIETY
The South’s oldest cultural institution, founded 1748

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