

Nickel Books and Hidden Libraries

Front Royal's Tabard Inn Library

Lewis Moten
Archives Committee, Warren Heritage Society
Trustee, Samuels Public Library

Ivy Lodge • 15-minute talk



Why I care about this story

Lewis Edward Moten III, known as Lewie, joined the Samuels Public Library Board of Trustees in July 2023. He serves as Trustee at Large, sits on the Executive Committee, and serves on the Strategic Planning and Policy & Bylaws Committees.

- Archives Committee, Warren Heritage Society
- Little Free Library steward
- 2023 Day of Giving matching sponsor for Samuels Public Library
- Longtime technology professional focused on accessibility and inclusion
- A local reader whose mother pushed him toward the library to build reading comprehension



That personal thread — literacy, access, and community support — is exactly why the Tabard story feels so relevant.

The through-line is access

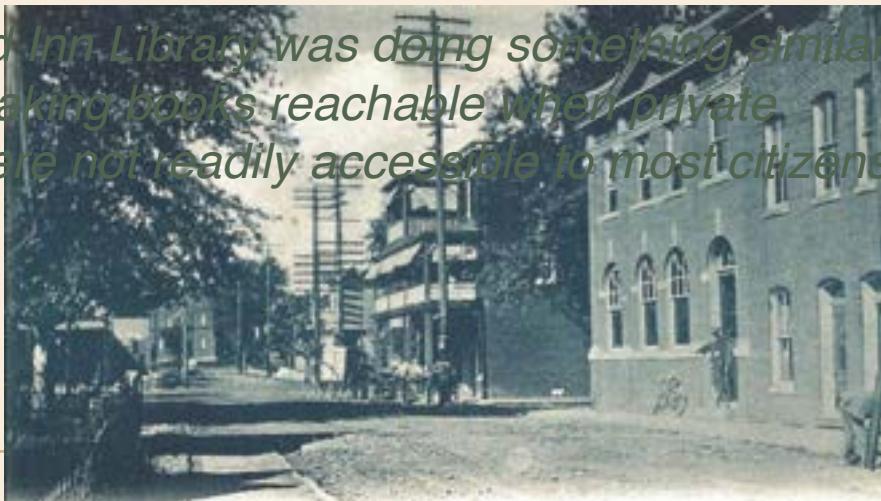
Before I became a library trustee, I was already trying to put books within reach.

**Little Free Library steward
2023 Day of Giving matching
sponsor
Archives Committee researcher**



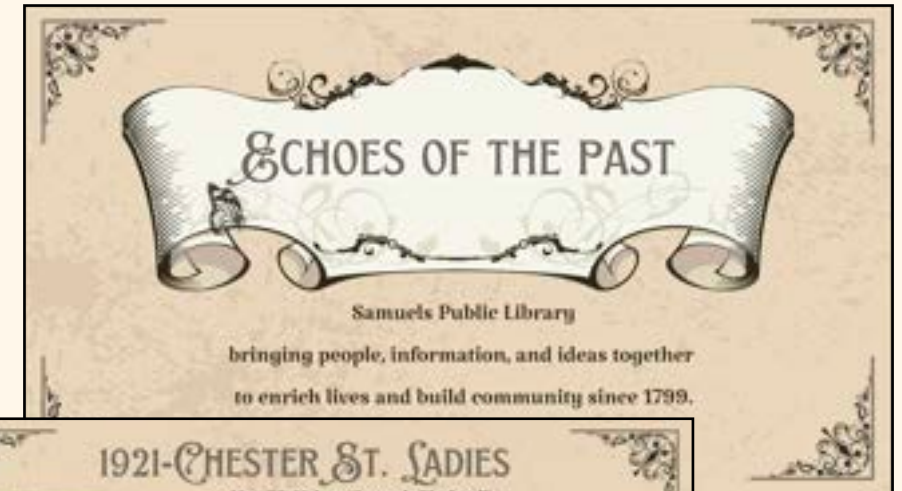
Royal Examiner: [Town Talk: A conversation with Michelle Ross and Lewie Moten - Samuels Public Library Day of Giving](#)

The Tabard Inn Library was doing something similar in 1903: making books reachable when private libraries were not readily accessible to most citizens.

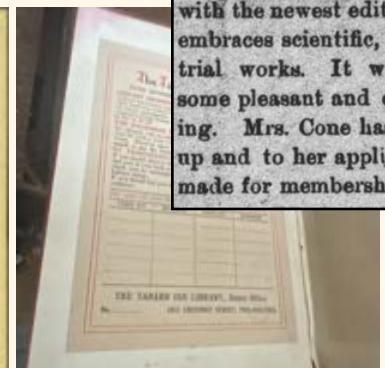


The research trail began with the Silver Tea

- 1 Colleen Snyder came to the Warren Heritage Society archives looking for the history of Samuels Public Library.
- 2 Her research connected naturally to the library's restored Silver Tea tradition and to older fundraising history.
- 3 Virginia Chronicle, archive collections, and local notes led to Main Street, Trout's drug store, and the Tabard station.
- 4 The Tabard Inn side research eventually grew into Wikipedia pages and a broader list of Tabard Inn Library locations.



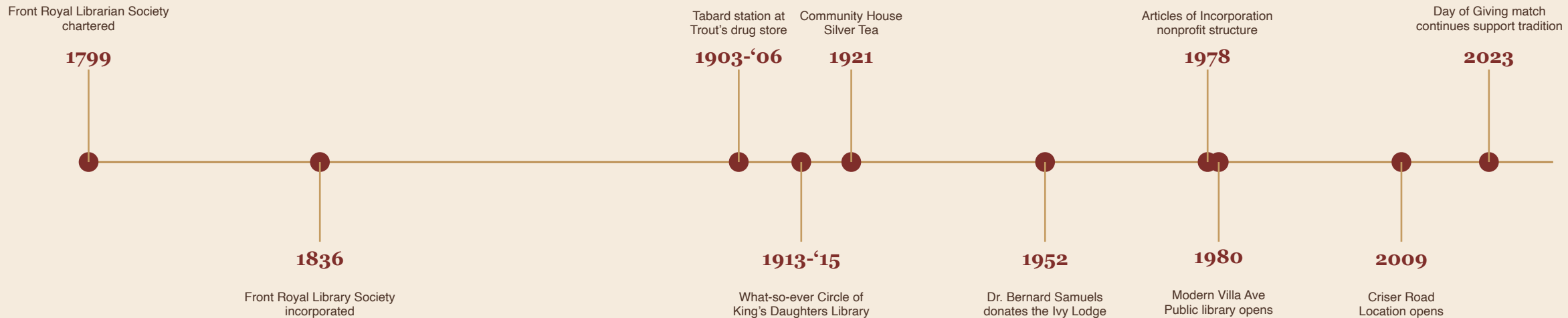
We have a in former issue spoken of the advantages of having a library in our place. We hear that through the efforts of Mrs. B. M. Cone we will shortly have the benefit of the Tabard Inn Library. The plan is each member pays \$1.50 and in order to obtain books he buys tickets, 5c. each, or six for 25c.; each ticket for one book. The library sends here 130 to 150 books each month, taking back those read and replacing them with the newest editions. The library embraces scientific, social and industrial works. It will be placed in some pleasant and convenient building. Mrs. Cone has been getting it up and to her application should be made for membership.



Front Royal was already a library town

This timeline is roughly time-ordered, so the clustering helps show how close some of these efforts were.

Some of the “Library Ladies” for the community house library, including the assistant, Miss Bertie Beaty, were in the What-so-ever Circle of King’s Daughters.



Tonight’s talk is being hosted in Ivy Lodge, the building Dr. Bernard Samuels donated in 1952. In one room, some original shelves are still visible behind panels.

A library in a bookcase

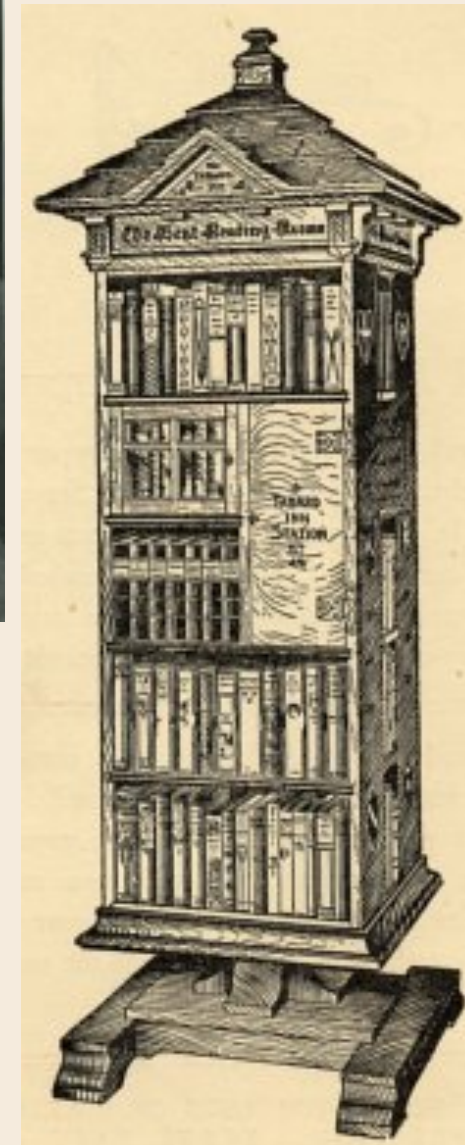
1902 founded by Seymour Eaton

125–250 books in many revolving cases

2,040+ exchange stations reported

1 million+ members claimed at peak

Tabard Inn Library placed distinctive rotating bookcases in ordinary places: drugstores, shops, offices, homes, trains, and steamships.



Why not make money this way?

\$100 buys this Tabard Inn Library—100 books of your own selection (from 2000 titles). Each book is a Tabard Inn cloth case and exchangeable at 2000 Tabard Inn stations in United States, Canada or Great Britain.

Operate a Circulating Library

For \$25, \$50 or \$100, we sell you a 25-book, 50-book or 100-book circulating library and a Tabard Inn Cabinet; and give you the Tabard Inn book exchange privilege by which you can make a handsome regular income.

Enormous popularity.—A million Tabard Inn books are now in circulation in the United States. Many thousands of people carry these books and exchange them wherever they can find a Tabard Inn branch library.

Many making money.—Store keepers and others who have these libraries are making a good deal of money through this renting and exchange system. The demand is tremendous and constantly increasing.

Sell it anywhere.—The library may be kept in a store, or office in connection with other business or in a private dwelling as a little business in itself.

How to operate it.—You select your library from a list of 2000 books. We immediately ship the library and cabinet with full directions for managing them in the most profitable way.

The usual charge for exchanging a Tabard Inn book is 1 cent. Some branches charge 2c. Some charge 1c for 1-cent a day or 1c for 1-cent a week. You use your own judgment. A hundred books rented at 1 cent a week would bring you \$20 a month or 20 per cent a year on the investment.

In a store there is a double profit in such a library—its own profit and the profit from new customers which it always attracts to the store.

The labels on the books can be adapted to any plan you choose. You can exchange your entire library for a new one any time at very slight expense. You virtually have a book-book library to draw from.

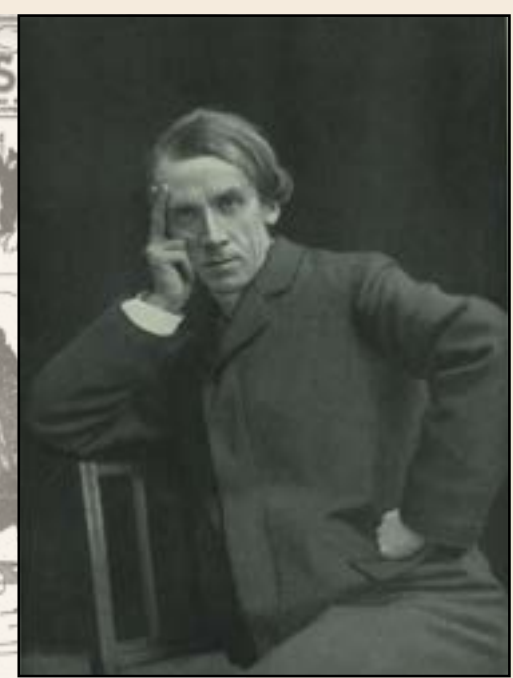
There is no other way in which you can invest so small a sum and receive so large a profit.

Don't "put it off." Write today for complete descriptive circular.

The Tabard Inn Library
1627 Chestnut Street Philadelphia

Seymour Eaton: the promotor behind the bookcase

- Canadian-born author, journalist, editor, publisher
- Founder of Booklovers' Library - the largest circulating library, and Tabard Inn Library
- Wrote The Roosevelt Bears childrens books, and creator of the "Teddy Bear," after President Theodore Roosevelt's compassion toward a bear while hunting.
- Helped turn books, branding, memberships, and mailing lists into a national reading business



A SURVIVING EXAMPLE

Oceanside helps us picture the exchange station



These photographs from Oceanside Public Library in Oceanside, California show a preserved Tabard Inn Library exchange station on display.

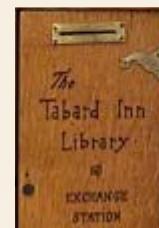
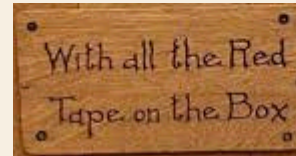
Most of us know the Tabard system only from bookplates, ads, and scattered references. A surviving case makes the idea concrete.

A phrase along the top reads:

The Best Reading Rooms In the United States Are the homes of The American People



Restored by The Questers: El Camino Real Questers



Photos courtesy of Oceanside Public Library

HOW “NICKEL BOOKS” WORKED

Membership made books portable — and reachable

Buy into the network

Membership was commonly advertised around \$1.50; some local ads offered \$1.35.

Exchange instead of owning a shelf

A patron returned a book, paid a small fee or used a check, and selected another.

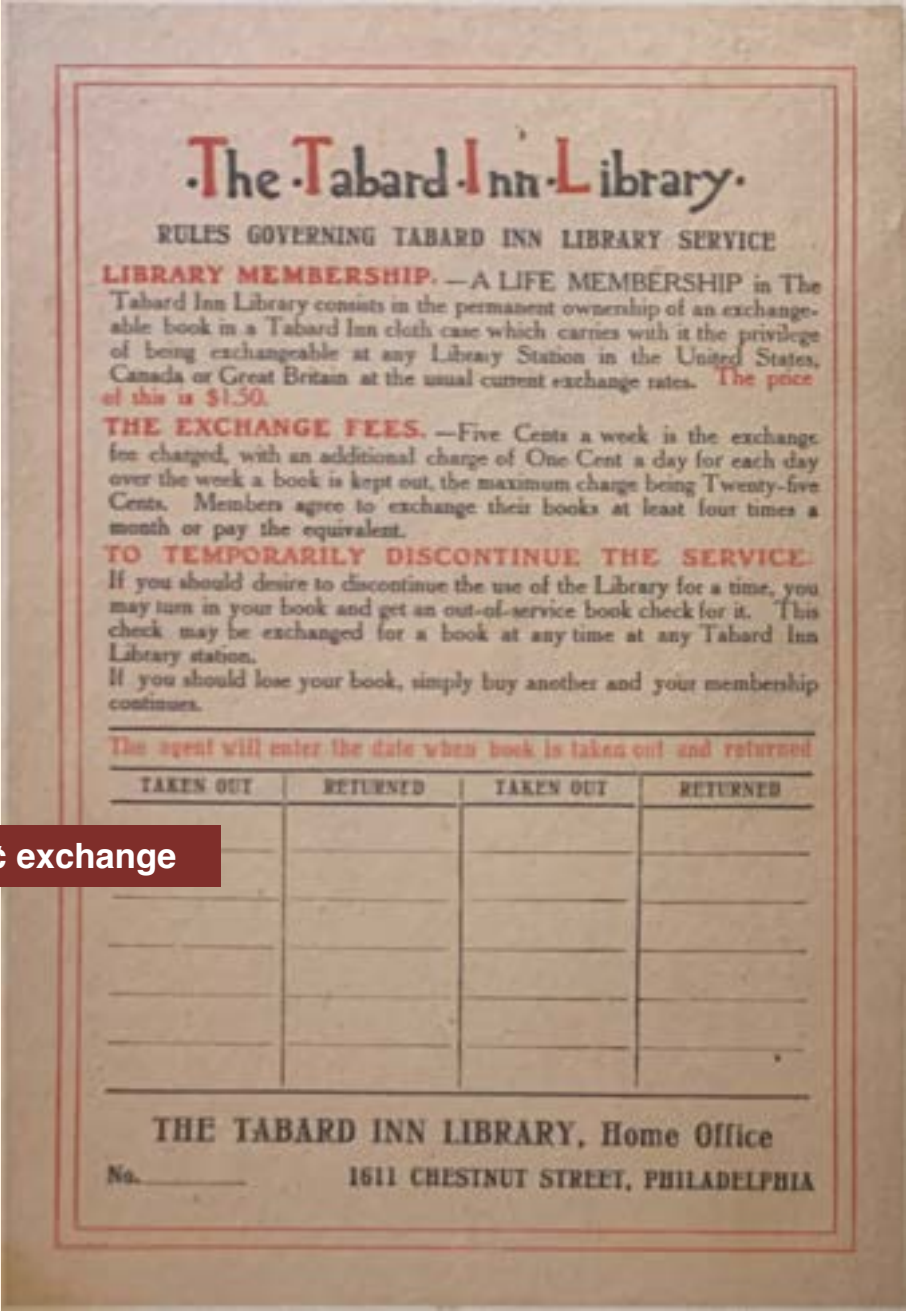
Access widened

A storefront exchange lowered the barrier where private libraries were not readily accessible to most citizens.

Freshness was the product

Stations received rotating shipments so the selection would not go stale.

5¢ exchange



FRONT ROYAL, 1903

The hidden library at Trout's drug store

In 1903, Front Royal joined the Tabard network through a station associated with Trout & Turner on Main Street.

130–150 books arriving each month

5¢ book checks / exchanges

\$1.35 membership in local ads

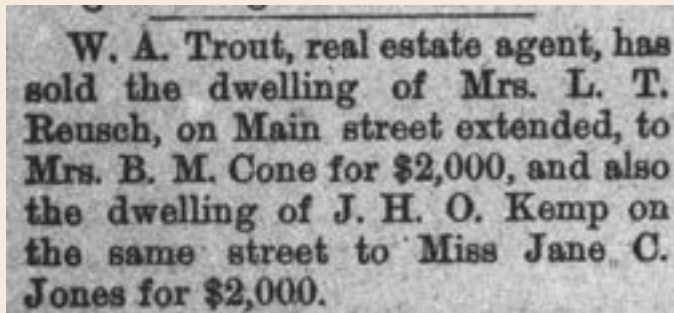
Membership to the Tabard Inn
Library and your choice of books.—
Very latest publications. \$1.35
Trout & Turner.



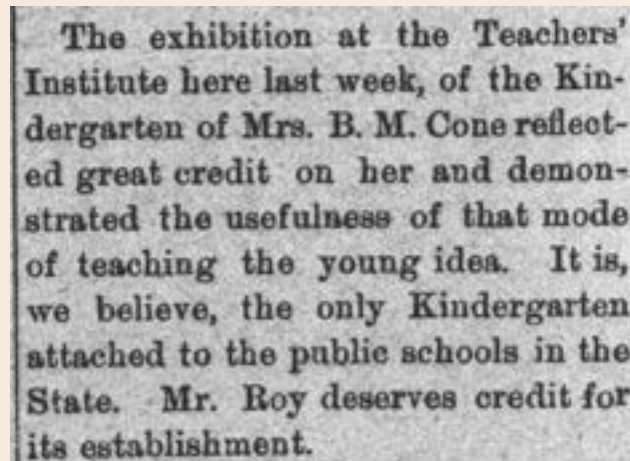
Front Royal / Trout & Turner

A kindergarten teacher helped bring books to town

Mrs. B. M. Cone is described in the local story as a new kindergarten teacher and, at the time, was thought to be Virginia's first public kindergarten teacher, who lived on Main Street.

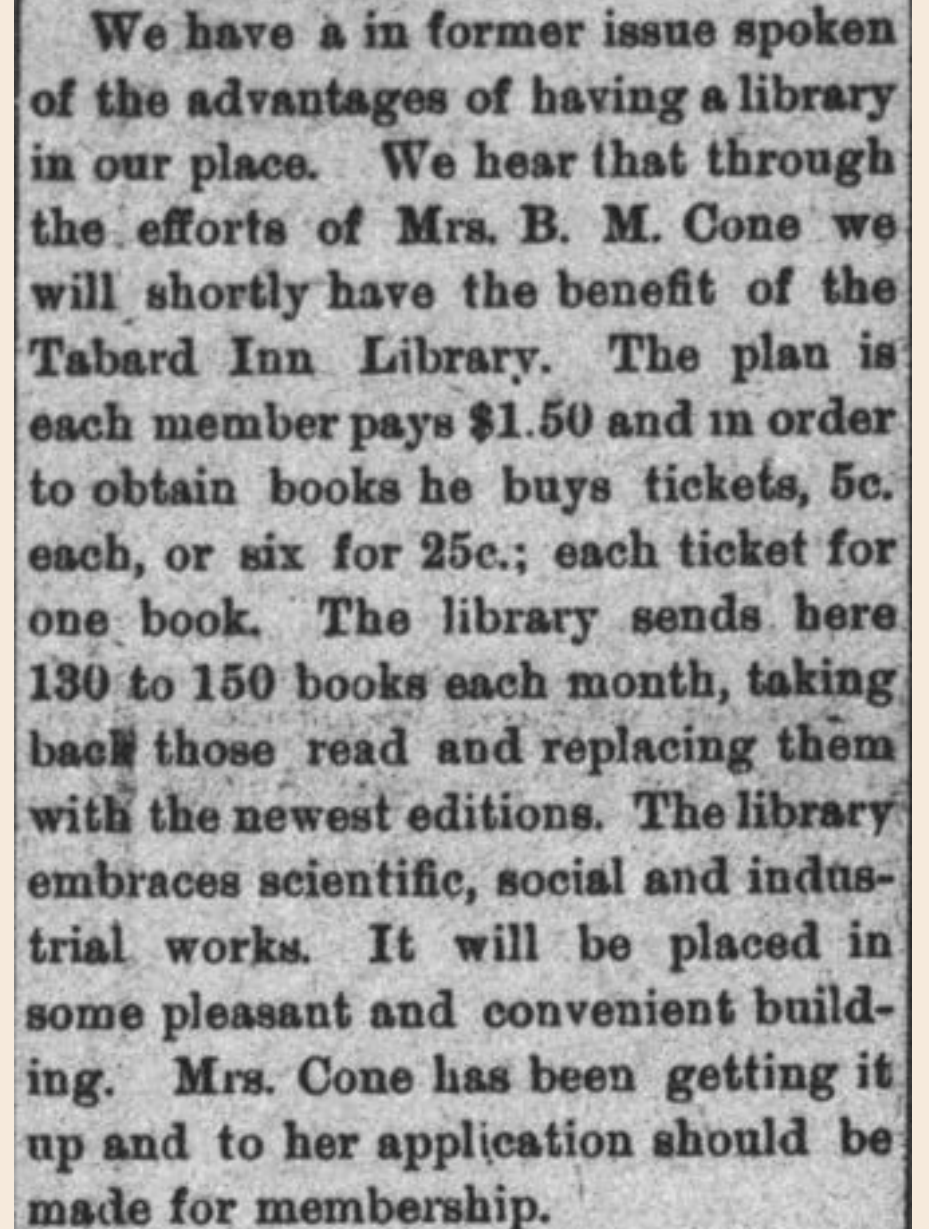


W. A. Trout, real estate agent, has sold the dwelling of Mrs. L. T. Reusch, on Main street extended, to Mrs. B. M. Cone for \$2,000, and also the dwelling of J. H. O. Kemp on the same street to Miss Jane C. Jones for \$2,000.



The exhibition at the Teachers' Institute here last week, of the Kindergarten of Mrs. B. M. Cone reflected great credit on her and demonstrated the usefulness of that mode of teaching the young idea. It is, we believe, the only Kindergarten attached to the public schools in the State. Mr. Roy deserves credit for its establishment.

That detail links the Tabard station to early childhood education, women's civic work, and the practical business of getting books into daily life.



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Reading moved through everyday places

Drugstores, chapter rooms, newspaper offices, private homes, and the Community House — Front Royal's reading culture did not live in one building.

The “library” often appears as a relationship: a teacher, a shopkeeper, a civic circle, a volunteer, a place to exchange books, or a place to drop them off.



library access without a library building

Research map images embedded from the February 2025 email notes

A chapter room became a public doorway

What-so-ever Circle of King's Daughters and Sons

- 1888

local chapter activity appears in the records
- Nov. 7, 1913

library opened in the Chapter Room
- 80 books

40 new books plus about as many donated volumes
- Tues. / Thurs. / Sat.

open for subscriptions and exchanges
- 1914–1915

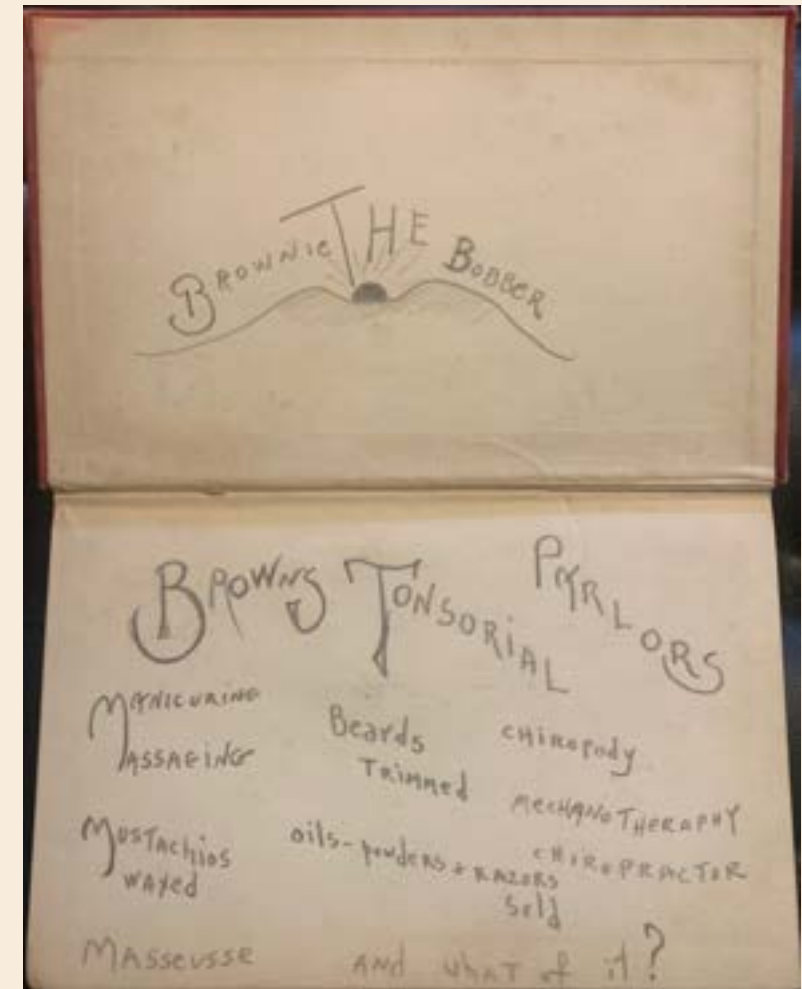
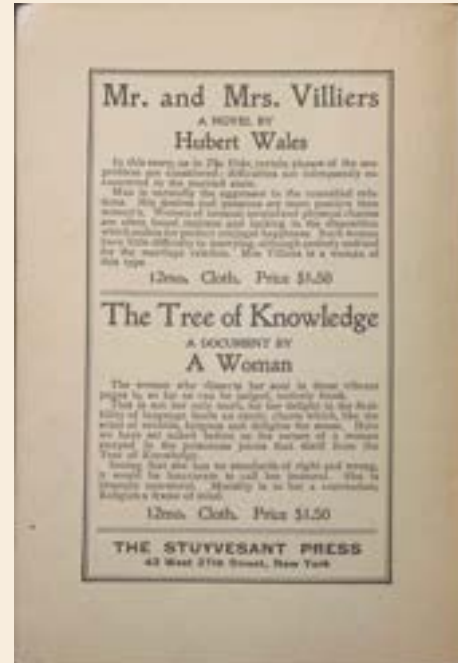
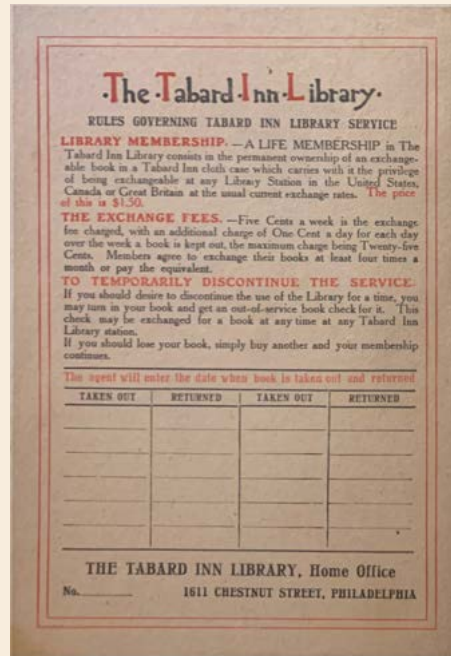
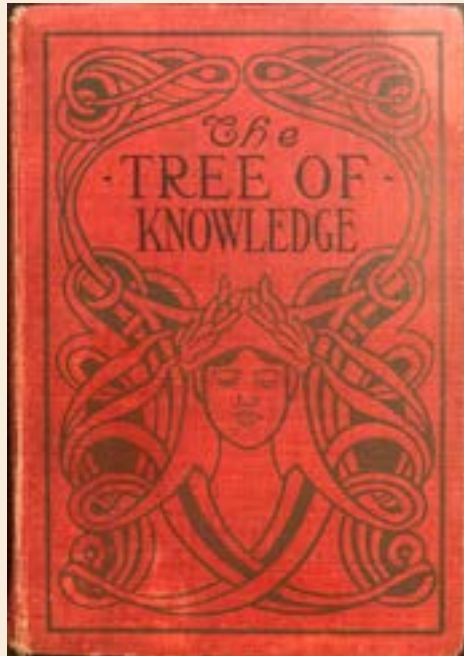
moves, meetings, and later links to the Community House story

Women’s charitable work, access to books, nursing support, and the later Community House/Samuels story overlap here.



Minutes page recording the library opening in the Chapter Room

“The Tree of Knowledge” became a local billboard



What was being advertised?

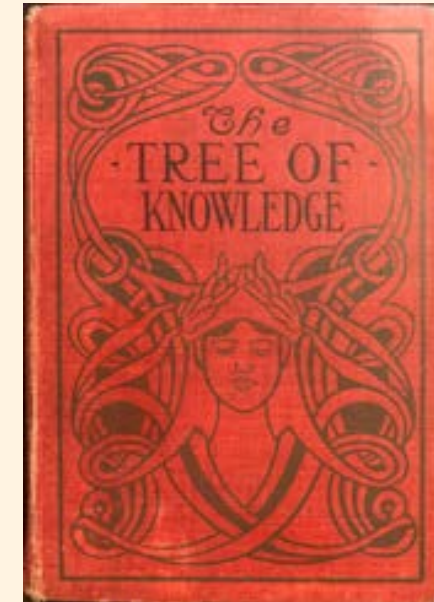
One purchased example shows how some Tabard books doubled as traveling advertisements. The endpaper of this copy was used to promote “Brownie THE Bobber” and Brown’s Tonsorial Parlors.

- A grooming / barber trade:
- manicuring
 - massaging
 - mustachios waxed
 - beards trimmed
 - oils, powders, and razors sold
 - chiropody
 - mechano therapy / chiropractor

Mass literacy created a huge market for “nickel books”

New reading formats always bring arguments about quality, taste, and abundance.

- Public education increased literacy, and millions of readers wanted self-education and cheap entertainment.
- Cheap hardback books flooded a market that had few entertainment alternatives before radio and before feature films became widespread.
- Critics complained about a flood of “trash” books — a debate that feels familiar today when AI can flood the market with books that may have little substance.
- Tabard turned that reading boom into a portable exchange system rather than a one-book-at-a-time purchase habit.



The through-line is community access

- 1799** a local subscription library begins
- 1903** a Main Street drug store hosts a hidden library station
- 1913** King's Daughters open a Chapter Room library
- 1921** Community House Silver Tea raises support through community generosity
- 1952** Samuels Public Library opens in Ivy Lodge
- Today** we are literally meeting inside that 1952 story

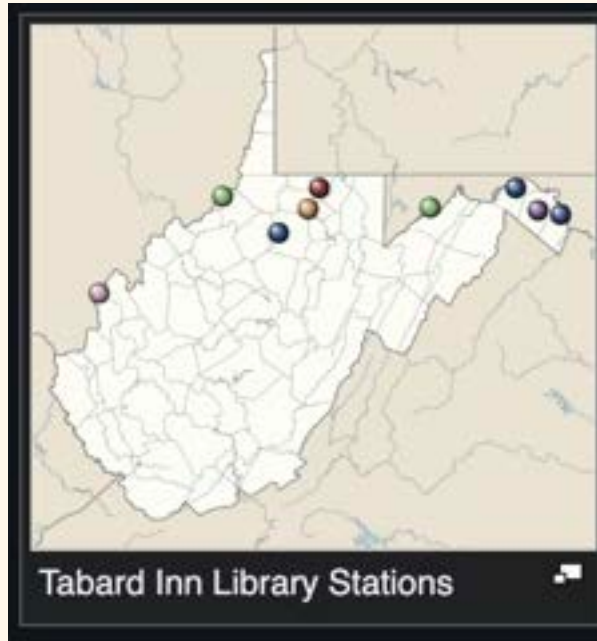
Some original shelves are still visible behind panels in one of the rooms.



Mapping the Tabard footprint

The earliest known year for the establishment:

- ● Unknown
- ● Established in 1902
- ● Established in 1903
- ● Established in 1904
- ● Established in 1905
- ● Established in 1906
- ● Established in 1907
- ● Established in 1908



These maps help show how widely the Tabard Inn Library spread and also place Front Royal within a regional network rather than as an isolated curiosity. They start to reveal a distribution network.

The colored dots reflect the earliest known year of establishment. Front Royal belongs to the 1903 wave.

More regional map views



Pennsylvania, New York, Maryland, and Washington, D.C., all show how the network moved across both urban and smaller-market settings.

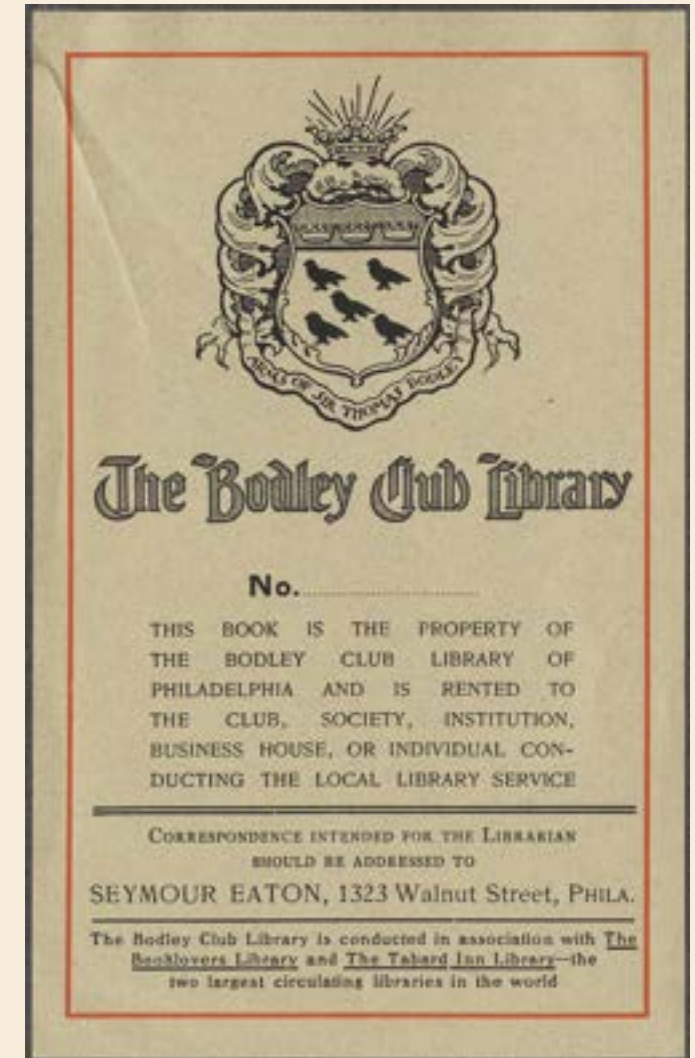
- Front Royal's station makes more sense when seen as part of a broad Mid-Atlantic pattern.
- The maps also reinforce how quickly this commercial reading network spread in just a few years.

A related network: the Bodley Club Library

The Bodley Club Library was a related Seymour Eaton venture aimed more directly at libraries. Including it helps show that Tabard was part of a larger commercial ecosystem of circulating books and subscription services.



Tabard was not a one-off gimmick. It sat inside a whole experimental world of book distribution.



This talk is a local archive story with a national shelf mark

Core local grounding

Warren Heritage Society archives • King's Daughters Minutes • research emails with Colleen Snyder and Amy Hayes • Samuels Public Library history • Colleen Snyder / In Search of Giants • Virginia Chronicle / Library of Virginia • Little Free Library stewardship • 2023 Day of Giving match

Broader research trail

Wikipedia • Wikimedia Commons • Internet Archive • Library of Congress • HathiTrust • Google Books • Library History Buff • Wisconsin Library Association • The Questers • Oceanside Public Library • Kuenzig Books • Chagrin Falls Historical Society & Museum • Indiana State Library • Pennsylvania Newspaper Archive • Hoosier State Chronicles



Wikipedia pages created / expanded for this research: Tabard Inn Library • Booklovers' Library • Bodley Club Library • List of Tabard Inn Library locations