

First Home: The Stissing House



On January 9, 1798, at the public house of Ebenezer Baldwin (now the Stissing House), forty-seven men met and formed a subscription, or membership, library and voted on a board of trustees. A certificate was placed with the county clerk's office by the library board chairman, Ebenezer Dibblee, incorporating the library as the "Union Library of Pine Plains" and "the first public library in the Town of North East" (of which Pine Plains was then part), making this the first public library in Dutchess County.

At the next meeting on February 17, 1798, also held at the Stissing House, six resolutions were passed and Asahel Haskins, the proprietor of the public house across the street (later the Ketterer Hotel, where the town park is now), was chosen as the first librarian. This date is considered the founding of the library.

It may seem odd to us today that the library had its first home in what was essentially a bar. However, public houses in those days were the centers of a community, where all (including women and children) were welcome and where the locals met to discuss the issues of the day. The Stissing House was opened as a log tavern in 1782 and in 1783 the spring election for North East Precinct was held there. Town business was subsequently conducted here for many years, and this was also where the Pine Plains Bank was organized in 1839. The Stissing House together with the Ketterer Hotel on the opposite corner were the centers of life in Pine Plains for about 100 years.

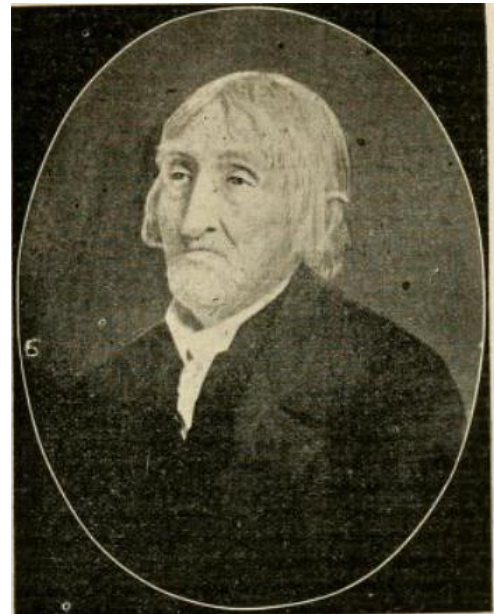
While library board meetings were held in different locations around town, it is believed that the books remained at the Stissing House. However, the trustees knew that this location was not meant to be permanent and thereby stipulated in the library's bylaws that the "library shall be kept in the (center or on what is called the Pine Plains in the) Town of North East".

In November of 1798, a committee of three went to New York with \$160.36 with which they purchased ninety-five volumes, and eighteen more volumes were donated bringing the total to one hundred thirteen. The library was now ready to loan books. A book could be borrowed from the library for 6 weeks with a one cent fine for every day after that.

Many libraries started out in 18th century America as subscription libraries before the advent of tax-supported free libraries in the 19th century. These libraries survived on new subscriptions and on annual dues from the subscribers. At the Union Library of Pine Plains, a subscription cost two dollars and fifty cents and dues were fifty cents per year. A subscription made the holder an owner of a share in the library. Shares were considered part of a personal estate and were transferable and able to be passed on to one's heirs, however non-payment of annual dues risked forfeiting a share. A donation of books worth \$2.50 (the cost of a share) automatically made the donor a subscriber.

Stephen Eno, a lawyer, came to Pine Plains around 1803 and purchased the William Bassett property on South Main Street. Included with this property was the right to Bassett's share in the library.

Stephen Eno quickly became involved in the library and was appointed librarian and treasurer in 1804, positions which he held until around 1829. He was considered the life of the library during this period, his background giving him an appreciation of books, and he understood the importance of the library in the growing rural community. By 1828, the library had accumulated two hundred and sixty-one books. Among these, interestingly, was a copy of the Koran.



Stephen Eno

The librarian's salary during this time was \$5 per year.

It is thought that the library remained in the Stissing House during the time that Stephen Eno was the librarian, however according to local historian Isaac Huntting when Eno retired from his positions with the library in 1829 the library languished for about thirty years, and we don't know much about its whereabouts or who the librarian was. We know from the local newspaper, *The Pine Plains Register*, that in 1859 the library was in August & Bernheim's Store, but we do not know where that store was located; it does not appear that the store was a long-time Pine Plains business.