

Choice in Middletown ... A Long Tradition

Choice has moved into new editorial offices at Liberty Square in Middletown, Connecticut. And why, you may have wondered, has Choice, a publication of the Association of College and Research Libraries, itself located in Chicago, moved into its fourth Middletown location instead of moving to Chicago? And since Choice has been an ACRL publication since its inception 45 years ago, why wasn't it started in Chicago?

Choice began as a project of the Council on Library Resources (now the Council on Library and Information Resources; <http://www.clir.org>). The Council on Library Resources (CLR) had been formed in 1956, during a period in which there was explosive library growth, characterized by "a proliferation of individual, uncoordinated activity among academic libraries."¹

We sat down with Richard Gardner, the first editor of Choice, to hear the story...

GARDNER: "It was actually CLR, and more specifically its president, Verner Clapp, who recognized the need for a professional journal to review books for undergraduate and community college libraries. The Council decided to fund a new journal and went looking for a likely grant recipient. ALA was encouraged to submit a proposal, and in 1961 CLR awarded the American Library Association \$150,000 to establish a book review service for college libraries. [That grant would have to be worth over a million in 2009, according to DollarTimes <http://www.dollartimes.com/calculators/inflation.htm>]. A further grant of \$100,000 was made by CLR in 1965, when it became apparent that Choice would not become financially viable for another year or two."

It took a while before the founding editor came on board. Richard K. Gardner, librarian at Marietta College in Ohio, was appointed editor of Choice in February 1963 and started full-time editorial operations in July, at the conclusion of Marietta's academic year.

GARDNER: "Between February and June of 1963, Verner Clapp talked to me a lot about what he wanted. He said that the editorial offices should be located near the center of the U.S. publishing industry, which at that time was the New York-Boston corridor. Clapp believed that the journal belonged on a college campus so that the staff would have access to the bibliographic resources and the collections of an actual library. Furthermore, he thought that the staff needed daily contact with college faculty members, since the basic idea behind the journal was that the books would be reviewed by college faculty members who taught in the specific subject field of the book.

Clapp thought that ALA was a big bureaucracy and too cumbersome an organization. The ALA Publishing Department had been producing *Booklist*, a book review journal aimed at small public libraries and school libraries, for over 50 years. The reviews in the *Booklist* were written by a permanent staff of librarians who worked at the ALA headquarters.

Clapp did not want his new journal to be confused in any way with *Booklist*. That is why he insisted that this new project not be at ALA headquarters in Chicago. He was very adamant about this and since he was giving the money, ALA had to give in."

Wesleyan Connections

A search for college locations began immediately. Most of the Ivy League colleges between Boston and New York were canvassed to see if they had empty space in their libraries and would be willing to rent space to Choice. Only Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, and Sarah Lawrence College, just north of New York City in Bronxville, could offer space. Eventually Wesleyan was chosen for several reasons. First of all, Wesleyan had a much larger book collection than Sarah Lawrence, and it was particularly rich in bibliographic tools. Secondly, Wyman Parker, the librarian of Wesleyan, was well known to both Richard Gardner and to Choice's first assistant editor, Virginia Clark.

GARDNER: "Wesleyan had space available on the top floor of the library. We had two large rooms and a small office for the modest rent of \$1.60 a square foot! We kind of wished in the early days we had been nearer New York, because being in Middletown meant driving to New Haven and then taking the train, and maybe Sarah Lawrence would have been a better place for that reason. But we ended up in Middletown, and once you started hiring staff, you became tied to the local community. There were two other publishing operations in Middletown with which we had to compete for staff: one was Scholastic Publishing, which published *My Weekly Reader*, and the other was the Wesleyan University Press. Our pay scale

was the ALA Chicago pay scale, which was slightly higher than the average Middletown salary. This enabled us to pick up top-notch people. Also in the early days, we were able to recruit several faculty wives as staff members, since they had few other outlets for their talents.

During the summer and fall of 1963, before the first issue in March 1964, we were very busy. First, we had to get books to review. This is where our location near New York proved very valuable. I was the one who went to New York to see the publishers. In the early months I would often spend three days a week visiting publishers trying to persuade them to provide us with review copies of their publications. Mary Poole, our production editor, would accompany me, looking for advertisers. We received a great deal of help in those early days from Dana Pratt of the American Association of University Publishers and from Dan Lacy, the managing director of the American Book Publishers Council, who both urged their members to cooperate with this new venture."

Recruiting Reviewers

GARDNER: "Our next task was to recruit college faculty members to do our reviewing. Being in the Wesleyan library in the first months proved to be very helpful. Wesleyan faculty would wander up to the top floor and say, "Who are you? What are you doing here?" Many ended up as reviewers. One of our most avid supporters was a young professor named Nelson Polsby, who was a political scientist. He later went on to UC Berkeley. He became one of our first reviewers. He wanted everything—he would come in and take six books at once. (*N. W. Polsby's last review in Choice was in December 2006; he died in 2007 at the age of 72.*) A lot of these faculty members were young. They didn't have libraries of their own. They were on an assistant professor's salary, and books, even in those days, were comparatively expensive. To get a book that they wanted anyway, for "free," was an incentive to review it. We also recruited a lot of Trinity College faculty. If there was an emergency, we could call nearby faculty and ask, 'Would you take a look at this book for us?' Sometimes we would ask them to come to the office if we felt there was a

major question that needed to be answered. While we recruited reviewers nationwide, we depended heavily in the first years on the prestigious East Coast colleges as well as the many colleges in Ohio where both Virginia Clark and I had worked. Virginia Clark had begun her library career in the junior college field and so was able to recruit reviewers from the better two-year colleges."

Bibliographic Entries

GARDNER: "Another way we depended on Wesleyan was for the creation of bibliographic entries. Virginia Clark would go almost daily into the Wesleyan reference area to verify the entries of the books we were reviewing, as well as all the titles mentioned in each review. This was in the days before OCLC or automated library catalogs. We depended heavily on Wesleyan's superb collection to track down this vital information. As an academic-oriented publication we wanted to publish the most accurate information available, and this meant access to the Library of Congress printed catalogues as well as those of the British Museum and other libraries. It was only later when we were able to get an OCLC terminal that this need to use the Wesleyan library became less important."

Managing the Books

Most people don't realize how many books move in and out of the Choice office. On average, Choice now publishes about 6,500 reviews of books each year. Books are received directly from the printer or publisher, and are evaluated by editors to see whether they should be reviewed. If they are selected for review, they are matched with a reviewer and then packaged up again to be sent out to the reviewer's location. Choice never sees the physical volumes again—reviewers keep them. But what about all those volumes that are not reviewed? The "rejects"—and they may be rejected for many reasons not associated with their quality—are sent to "the back room." How many books are rejected each year? More than the number of reviews that are written. In fact, currently as many as 7,000 books are rejected because they are duplicates, parts of series, too specialized for undergraduate collections, or other reasons. Managing the mail is not a simple task at Choice.

GARDNER: "From the very beginning we had a Wesleyan student who opened the packages from the publishers, and who packaged up the books to be sent to reviewers once they were assigned, and then took them to the Middletown post office. The rejects went into the back room again. That proved to be one of the big problems at Wesleyan. We didn't have a back room. The mail room assistant operated out of a corner in the main office and was terribly cramped for space. It soon became apparent that the Wesleyan space was too small even though we were dealing with only about half the number of books that the magazine receives today.

We were in the Olin Library for only fifteen months. In 1964 we moved from Wesleyan to downtown Middletown, to a storefront on Broad Street some three blocks from the campus. The rental cost per foot immediately doubled! Unfortunately the building's layout was not ideal for our operation and the heating system did not work properly. Fortunately we had only signed a year's lease and so we soon started looking for more adequate space."

100 Riverview Center

GARDNER: "In 1966 Riverview Center was a new two-story complex built on a quarter of a city block on Main Street that had formerly housed the Sears department store. *Choice* rented part of the upstairs space. The street level was occupied by a group of stores. One big advantage was that the Middletown post office was just across the street. *Choice* was still only a few blocks from the Wesleyan campus, and so we continued to receive visits from some of our faculty reviewers. We also continued to use the reference facilities of the Olin Library.

Over the years space was added about three times to what we originally had. When we arrived, there was a Social Security office next to us. We had one side at the rear of the building overlooking the Connecticut River, and Social Security was located on the other side. When they left, *Choice* was able to acquire more space along the side overlooking the river.

In subsequent years the advantage of having the post office so close to us was eliminated when they moved to a larger

location on the outskirts of Middletown. We had enjoyed favored service from the Middletown post office over the years as our large volume of mail had moved them up two categories in the post office hierarchy.”

By 1966, building a publication from the ground floor up and moving offices twice in just three years had taken its toll. For reasons of health, Richard Gardner left soon after the move to Riverview Center and returned to work on his PhD and teach at Case Western Reserve University. During the next six years, Choice was led first by Peter Doiron and then by Louise Lockwood, but remained at 100 Riverview Center.

Then in June of 1972, ALA announced that Richard K. Gardner would return as editor of Choice, beginning in October. He remained there until 1977, when he became a professor at UCLA.

Communication with Chicago

GARDNER: “Through my first term and subsequently, *Choice* was governed through a managerial board consisting of four-year and two-year college librarians. Budgets had to be approved by that board, and any change in coverage or policy had to be approved by the board. In the early days the board met frequently, usually quarterly, most of the time in New York or in Chicago at ALA headquarters. Verner Clapp was often present, as he took a close interest in seeing how the magazine was developing.

I reported to David Clift, the executive director of ALA, for the first two or three years of *Choice*’s operation. Clift had been at ALA for twenty-some years. He was very interested in this project and agreed to take on personal responsibility for it in the initial phase. In my third year as editor of *Choice* he transferred that responsibility to the associate executive director, Grace Stevenson. Then in later years the executive secretary of ACRL was given oversight of the *Choice* operation. These people were all located at ALA headquarters in Chicago, but I had no trouble in communicating with them. There was a direct flight from the Hartford airport to Chicago and, because of the time difference, it was

possible to fly into Chicago in the morning, conduct a day’s worth of business, and then fly back to Connecticut in the evening. It was when I was at *Choice* the second time that we almost moved to Chicago.”

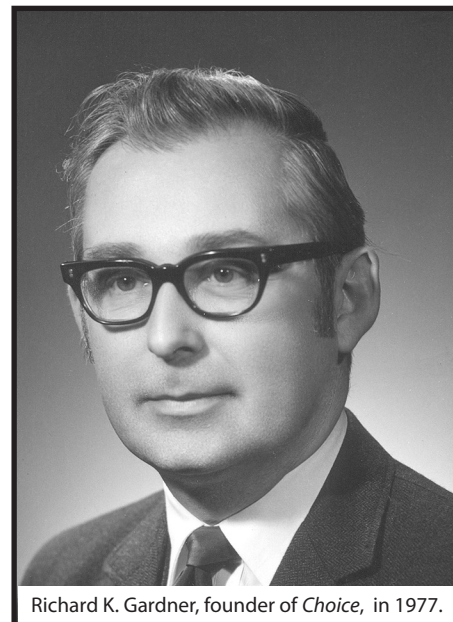
The Challenge from Chicago

GARDNER: “Almost immediately after I came back in October 1972, David Clift retired as executive director of ALA. He was replaced by Robert Wedgeworth. Right from the beginning, Wedgeworth wanted to centralize all of ALA’s publishing activities. He was going to take the Library Technology Project, *College and Research Libraries* and *CRL News*, and *Choice* and put everything all together under the ALA Publishing Department.

I didn’t want *Choice* to be absorbed into a bigger unit. I valued our independence. I recently found papers that showed that as early as March 1973 Wedgeworth announced that *Choice* was going to be moved to Chicago. But he had so many things on his plate that he didn’t get around to coming to *Choice* until November 1973. From March until November, we went through six months of not knowing what was going to happen. This, however, gave us time to prepare our case, which we did. Fortunately Beverly Lynch had become executive secretary of ACRL at the same time Wedgeworth took up his post and she agreed with us that, for some very valid reasons, we should stay in Middletown.

Mr. Wedgeworth came on November 16. I went to the airport and picked him up. It was a gloomy, rainy day. I tried to persuade him in the car on the way back to Middletown why we shouldn’t move. He spent the whole day at *Choice* and thankfully we were able to convince him.

By the end of the day, he realized that moving *Choice* would first of all be very expensive. We had had enough time for me to ask all the staff, some 25 of them, “Would you be willing to move to Chicago?” Only one editor said, “I have to. I need the job. I don’t want to go, but I would have to go.” Everyone else was tied to Middletown, be they editorial or clerical staff. They were settled there in the



Richard K. Gardner, founder of *Choice*, in 1977.

community and not about to move. Most of the women were married and could not leave their husbands for a job in Chicago. So that was the overriding problem. ALA would have to start the magazine from scratch, with a completely new staff, except for possibly me and one editor. We were pretty well paid on the ALA scale. I warned that in Chicago they wouldn’t get the same quality people, for the same price, that we had in Middletown.

My other argument was that *Choice* was identified with ACRL, not with ALA. The professors who did the reviews did not know who ALA was. “Association of College and Research Libraries” meant something to the professors; “ALA” didn’t. That was another reason we should stay in Middletown, a college town. The fact that we served the academic community meant we should stay in an academic environment, not the home of an association.

And then, of course, I reiterated over and over again that Verner Clapp had given the money and he particularly did not want *Choice* at ALA headquarters.

Wedgeworth went back to Chicago and Beverly Lynch called me up the next day and said, “You don’t have to move the magazine.”

That was the first crisis I went through. But the idea of moving *Choice* to Chicago never died completely. It never completely went away. Every once in awhile over the years we would hear rumors of our being moved.”

A Sense of Place and Space

Irving Rockwood, Choice editor and publisher, continues the story . . .

Despite the rumors, Choice never did move to Chicago. Instead, it quietly soldiered on at 100 Riverview Center for many more years. But all things must come to an end, and the end of Choice's Riverview Center tenure finally arrived on Friday, March 20, 2009. On that day, more than 42 years after Richard Gardner and company moved in, Choice bid a final farewell to Suite 298 at 100 Riverview Center. The following Monday, March 23, Choice staff reported to work for the first time at Liberty Square, a new, three-story, commercial office and retail building located at 575 Main Street in downtown Middletown's historic North End.

A New Address, a New Era: Choice at Liberty Square

Although a mere two blocks from Riverview Center, Liberty Square represents the beginning of a new era for *Choice*. For one thing, *Choice* is now a property owner. Prior to Liberty Square, *Choice* had always rented its office space. Suite 300, which comprises the entire third floor of Liberty Square, is a 7,635 square foot office condominium unit, and was purchased by *Choice* with the active support, assistance, and strong encouragement of ALA and ACRL.

Choice's brand new \$1.8 million office space contains nearly 2,000 more square feet than its Riverview Center accommodations. Custom designed for *Choice*, it features exterior offices with daylight access for more than 90 percent of staff, a significantly larger mail room with greatly increased storage space, and *Choice's* first ever conference room. Constructed with energy-efficiency and "green" building principles in mind, the new office includes energy-efficient plumbing and lighting fixtures and controls, fiber-optic Internet access, and a modern, high-efficiency heating and cooling system that utilizes fresh air to maintain office temperatures. All furnishings, interior finishes, and materials were selected for compliance with the United States Green

Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) criteria. *Choice* is preparing an application for Commercial Interior LEED certification for Liberty Square. If successful, the new office space will become ALA's first officially certified "green" property. In addition, the Liberty Square server room was designed to accommodate a complete set of backup servers for the ALA network, enabling it to function as ALA's disaster recovery site.

At a construction cost of approximately \$239 per square foot, Liberty Square was a relatively expensive project by Middletown area standards. These costs, however, compare favorably to the cost of constructing equivalent space in ALA's home town, Chicago, or New York, the closest major metropolitan area. As realtors are fond of reminding us, the three most important factors in real estate are "location, location, location." We continue to value our location near the heart of the New York-Boston corridor and within a short distance of the Wesleyan University campus and Olin Library, our original home. Our address may have changed, but our location has not.

A Sense of Place and Space: The Road to Liberty Square

The story of *Choice's* journey from Riverview Center to Liberty Square begins on March 1, 2004, at the annual *Choice* budget review session at ALA headquarters in Chicago. The topic was the *Choice* 2005 budget. The attendees included Mary Ellen Davis, executive director of ACRL, Keith Michael Fiels, executive director of ALA, Mary Ghikas, senior associate executive director of ALA, Gregory Calloway, ALA's chief financial officer, and Irving Rockwood, *Choice* editor and publisher.

The March 2004 version of the *Choice* 2005 budget was a relatively uncontroversial, unexciting document. It called for revenues of just over \$2.5 million, an increase of roughly 6 percent over the previous year, and net revenues (total revenues minus total expenses) of a mere \$35,000. The projected operating margin was slim, but *Choice's* recent history also suggested that year-end results were likely to be a bit more promising. Furthermore, *Choice's* net asset balance had recently topped \$1.5 million, of which \$1 million was held in the *Choice* operating fund and the remaining \$500,000

in the *Choice* endowment. This was hardly a massive war chest, especially since ALA strongly discourages the use of endowment monies for operational purposes, while ARCL guidelines require that a significant proportion of operating funds be held in reserve for emergency use. Still, it raised the question of what next?

Somewhat to the editor and publisher's surprise, the ALA participants, particularly Greg Calloway and Keith Fiels, raised the possibility of improving *Choice's* office space. In the discussion that followed, it was agreed that *Choice*, whose Riverview Center lease was due to expire in December 2007, should investigate available office space options, including the possibility of purchasing space.

Approximately five weeks later, on April 4, 2004, the editor and publisher submitted to Chicago the first of a lengthy series of documents dealing with office space. Entitled "*Choice* Office Space Options," this initial written effort reviewed *Choice's* lease arrangements and the state of the Middletown area commercial office rental and purchase markets, the condition of which, the memo noted, was currently "hot." It went on to note:

- Whatever we do, we should anticipate significantly higher office space costs for *Choice* from 2008 forward.
- The purchase option is likely to be affordable and comes with significant appreciation potential. However, it will also require a substantial capital outlay.
- Ownership would ensure more predictable office space costs for *Choice* and, depending on the size of the building purchased, might also make it easier to accommodate changes in *Choice's* office space requirements.

Finally, the memo concluded with two key recommendations:

- If ALA does wish to explore the purchase option, it will be best to make that decision sooner rather than later.
- In that case, I would strongly suggest working with an experienced local commercial real estate broker.

Not terribly long thereafter, the wheels were set in motion that would ultimately lead *Choice* to Liberty Square. A crucial step was the establishment of an informal working relationship with Trevor Davis, the leading commercial real estate broker in the Middletown area. Having previously utilized Trevor's services when negotiating its most recent lease at Riverview Center, *Choice* was familiar with Trevor and vice

versa. And so, at *Choice's* request, in late summer 2004 Trevor began looking for a suitable property that would meet *Choice's* criteria, which were fairly straightforward. The ideal property would have 7,000-7,500 square feet of usable space, a suitable interior layout, and a downtown location. It would also be affordable—initially defined as a purchase price in the vicinity of \$1.5 million not including furniture, fixtures, and normal moving expenses.

The decision to look for space in downtown Middletown was one of the early, critical decisions and had a significant impact on the search process. This was not a terribly controversial or difficult decision at the time: all parties involved—ALA, ACRL, and *Choice*—were in agreement on the advantages of a downtown location. For one thing, a downtown location would greatly mitigate the risk of move-related staff turnover. It was also the more environmentally friendly choice in comparison with the most likely alternative, a suburban office park. Finally, given *Choice's* many years at Riverview Center, it was clear that the convenience and amenities of a downtown location were highly advantageous for both staff and daily operations.

Despite this promising consensus, however, the search process produced very little in the way of immediate results. The reason was simple—an extremely limited supply of suitable space. As a result, all was quiet on the Middletown office space from late 2004, when Trevor Davis began his search, until the summer of 2005 when the first bona fide, and very exciting, lead turned up. Wesleyan University was seeking a buyer for Acheson House, a striking late-19th-century mansion adjacent to the Wesleyan campus, formerly the home of the *Weekly Reader* editorial offices, and currently serving as a student residence hall. While extensive modifications would be required, a preliminary estimate of remodeling costs suggested that, given the right purchase price, Acheson House would be an excellent fit.

Accordingly, the editor and publisher duly prepared and submitted to Chicago another in what ultimately became a too lengthy series of documents on the topic of office space. "Choice Office Space Options: A Preliminary Report," a 10-page memo submitted on August 31, 2005, included a preliminary estimate of Acheson House purchase costs. After further discussion with Chicago, this was followed by a more formal proposal

for purchasing Acheson House that was submitted to and approved by both the ACRL and ALA executive boards at the 2006 ALA Midwinter Conference in San Antonio. With these approvals in place, *Choice* submitted an initial offer to Wesleyan in early February 2006.

The Acheson House offer was an exciting moment full of great promise, a promise that was, however, to remain unfulfilled. For in the end, after receiving not one but two competing offers for Acheson House, Wesleyan did the unexpected. Rather than accepting either offer, or requesting a second set of bids, it elected to take Acheson House off the market. And so as of this writing, some three years later, Acheson House continues to house Wesleyan students. Slightly wearier and a bit worse for the wear, it stands proudly on the outskirts of campus, its quiet presence and fine lines serving as continuing reminders to *Choice* passersby of what might have been.

For some time it appeared Acheson House, *Choice's* first serious purchase opportunity, might be the last. Over the next year and a half, only a handful of new opportunities presented themselves. Of these, an even smaller number were suitable for *Choice's* needs, the most promising of which was, like Acheson House, taken off the market by the seller as negotiations opened. By early 2007, hopes for a downtown purchase had dimmed sufficiently that *Choice* had begun inviting and reviewing proposals for construction of a completely new building in a location outside downtown. As a result, the only substantive news a slightly weary editor and publisher could report to the ACRL and ALA executive boards at ALA Annual 2007 was that the search was continuing.

Fortunately, only a few weeks later, in late June of 2007, a new and promising proposal surfaced. The new proposal, initially known as the Liberty Street project, involved the purchase of a condominium unit in a new three-story commercial building to be erected on a former brown field at the northwest corner of Liberty and Main streets in downtown Middletown. The developer was Peter Harding, the owner of Riverview Center and *Choice's* current landlord.

And the rest, as they say, is history. Knowing the conclusion, one might guess that the rest of the journey to Liberty Square was seamless and anxiety-free. This, it is safe to say, would not be an entirely true statement. Nonetheless, as of late

summer 2007 events began moving along at a far more rapid pace than had heretofore been the case, culminating in the happiest of conclusions, *Choice's* arrival at Liberty Square on March 23, 2009.

Now that *Choice* is settling in at Liberty Square, one might ask, what next? Unfortunately, this is a question whose answer lies outside this author's sphere of competence. In an era of climate change, disruptive technologies, and economic upheaval, it is somewhat presumptuous even to speculate about the ultimate fate of a small, nonprofit, book review journal based in Middletown, Connecticut.

Still, this much can be said: at *Choice* we remain optimistic about the future, believing that the day when scholars and librarians no longer have a continuing need for those concise, authoritative *Choice* reviews has yet to arrive. And we are confident too that at Liberty Square *Choice* not only has a new address, it has a new home, one where, if the scholarly publishing gods allow, it can prosper and thrive for the foreseeable future.

Notes:

1. "CLIR History." Council on Library and Information Resources. <http://www.clir.org/about/history.html>