

Peaks of Joy, Valleys of Despair:

The History of the Syracuse University Library from 1871 to 1907

BY DAVID H. STAM

On 2 March 1995 University Librarian David Stam spoke to the members of Syracuse University Library Associates about the Library's early history. What follows is an edited transcript of that talk.

A few preliminary remarks before I begin my more formal presentation: First, I would like to note that today is the ninth anniversary of my arrival in Syracuse and the beginning of my own role in the history of this library. It is hard to imagine now what I might have expected then, but I must say that my sense of gratitude for my welcome and acceptance in this community is very deep. The experience of delving into the history of the library has increased my appreciation for all those who have made this institution what it is and has given me a heightened awareness of how many obstacles stood in the way of their endeavors to meet common and widely shared ideals of library service. It has also provided a humbling sense of continuity between the promise and problems of the past and those of the present.

Second, I would like to present my footnotes at the beginning by outlining the primary sources one must use to pursue the history of the library. Foremost is the three-volume history of Syracuse University.¹ Each volume includes a full chapter plus ancillary materials on the growth of the library, although they are progressively more sketchy as they approach Chancellor Tolley's years. There is an important master's thesis in history by Alicia H. Parry, approved in 1952, which traces the history of the library during the period of Chancellor Day's administration from 1894 to 1922. Another fine contribution is a Library School paper (undated) by our late colleague Marion L. Mullen,

which gives a comprehensive overview. Amy Doherty's relatively brief account, prepared for the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, provides another useful epitome of the library's history. Standing behind all of these sources is the University Archives; sporadic as they are, they provide not only useful documentation of specific periods, but often the flavor and spirit of the participants in these struggles to meet the needs of faculty and students. My special thanks go to University Archivist Amy Doherty and her staff for their help in preparing what follows.

Question: WHAT is history?

Answer: History, in the general sense of the word, signifies a true relation of facts and events; or, considered in a moral point of view, it is that lively philosophy, which, laying aside the formality of rules, supplies the place of experience, and teaches us to act with propriety and honour, according to the examples of others. . . . It opens the widest prospects to the eyes of mankind, in the spacious fields of literature, and is one of the most pleasing and important objects of study to which the mind can be directed.

I make no such lofty claims for the following historical folly. The above extract, however, serves to introduce the history of the Syracuse University Library, taken as it is from the book which in 1871 started a collection which now numbers over two and a half million volumes, and it is still one of them. The *Daily Orange* on 2 May 1933 reported that "the first book to be accessioned was Benjamin Tucker's *Epitome of Ancient & Modern History*, [Philadelphia] 1822 (see fig. 1). It is still on the library shelves and has never been taken out." Until last week, when this researcher charged out the book, that statement remained true, but nonetheless the volume reveals a good deal of its own history here, reflecting that of the library itself (see fig. 2). You can see, for example, two

versions of its original classmark, a fixed location notation (based on European classification standards) indicating the assignment of the book to a particular section (A), shelf (1), and number (1). You can see the results of the great reclassification debate of 1895 in which Chancellor Day first resisted as too expensive and then--with the encouragement of Melvil Dewey himself--consented to the shift to the Dewey Decimal Classification system, our primary means of locating materials until 1962. Yet to come is the volume's re-reclassification to the Library of Congress scheme adopted in that year. Tucker's work is but one of about a quarter-million pieces awaiting conversion at a current cost of about four dollars per title. Potential donors take heed.

On 17 September 1953 the book was charged out for mending, the only entry on an otherwise blank date due card. The primitive state of preservation practice in 1953 made that trip to the bindery a harmful one, the mending damaging the book and obscuring some of the text; as it so often happens, the road to preservation hell is paved with good intentions. Tucker's next major journey was on 15 July 1965 when the volume was sent to "storage," a polite euphemism for the notorious "Con Can," the Continental Can building on Erie Boulevard (see fig. 3). It languished there for another decade before its return from the dead to the phoenix of Bird Library, where in the reconfiguration of 1991 it would have been moved at least three times before coming to rest at location 902.T891 in the lower-level compact storage shelves, sometimes known as Compost Storage. Its next destination will be the Department of Special Collections, for reclassification (yet again), preservation, and incarceration as protection for a university icon. (I should add that this is a very scarce book indeed. The National Union Catalog lists no copies, and the national on-line database, OCLC, lists only six copies plus a microfilm version at the Library of Congress.)

In what context did these peregrinations occur? In brief outline, plagiarized from many sources, the seminal dates if not the peaks of joy of our title, were these: opening in 1871 in the Myers block at East Genesee and Montgomery streets; move to a back room

of the third floor of the Hall of Languages in 1873; acquisition of the Leopold von Ranke collection in 1888, with completion of a new building to house the collection (the present Tolley Building) in 1889; Dewey classification system adopted in 1895, seven years before Syracuse adopted Melvil Dewey himself by awarding him an honorary doctorate; Audubon Elephant Folio acquired by gift from James Belden, university trustee, mayor of Syracuse, and United States congressman, in 1896; Andrew Carnegie's grant for a new library building in 1905, with opening in September 1907; Library School established as an independent college in Carnegie Building in 1908; Ranke collection cataloged for the first time in 1913; campaign for a new library building begins in 1930s, promised in 1950s, and opened in 1972; transfer of medical library to the State University of New York in 1950; shift to Library of Congress classification in 1962, the same year in which Syracuse University Library became a member of the Association of Research Libraries; a quarter-million volumes sent to storage at Con Can in 1963 to relieve space crisis in Carnegie Building; beginning of pioneering library automation efforts in mid-1960s; opening of Bird Library in 1972; science collections housed in Carnegie Building (cohabiting with the Mathematics Department) and serving as hub of five science libraries; SULIRS, one of the first on-line catalogs in the country, goes public in 1979; opening of the Diane and Arthur Belfer Audio Laboratory and Archive in 1982, following two decades of record collecting; Hawkins Building replaces Con Can as remote storage site, now used primarily for archival materials, in same year; reconfiguration of Bird Library in 1991; completion of William Safire Seminar Room in 1994; rediscovery of Benjamin Tucker's *Epitome* in 1995.

In that selective list what concerns us today is only the initial period, through 1907. Although the outline is fairly clear, the details shift in and out of focus as the documentary sources are alternately more or less complete. Little is known, for example, of John P. Griffin, appointed in 1871 as the fledgling university's first librarian, but simultaneously as clerk and registrar of the university, in which capacities he served until

1875. When he moved a small but growing library of a few thousand volumes from downtown Syracuse to the pastoral Hill in 1873, the collection was housed in wire cages, the catalog locked in the Registrar's Office (presumably in another location), and books could be used in the Library Room only, between the hours of 9 a.m. and 1 p.m.

The *University Herald* of 5 June 1875 dutifully reported that "Registrar Griffin visited Rochester University [*sic*] the other day for the purpose of inspecting the arrangement and index system of its library and was much pleased by them." That report stated that the work of cataloging and indexing would be completed ("in a most convenient and novel manner") before the opening of next year--the first of many such promises over 120 years, none of which has yet to be fulfilled. Classification issues have remained a major preoccupation throughout the entire history of the library, with many changes in standards and practice being dictated by local needs and national trends.

By the time of the fall opening Griffin had been replaced by the Reverend Charles Wesley Bennett, professor of history and logic, who also served part time as librarian from 1875 to 1884. Although his activities as librarian are sparsely documented, he serves as one of the heroes of this story. Originally on the faculty of Genesee College, our antecedent institution, he served the university from the beginning until he left in 1884 to join the faculty of Garrett Biblical Institute in Evanston, Illinois. In 1875 he took over a Syracuse University Library collection of 2,300 volumes and, according to Galpin, was "acutely conscious of the tremendous need for adequate library facilities," no understatement in a decade when average annual expenditures on books and incidentals was \$26.13.² Bennett is credited with extending the library hours to 3 p.m., following considerable protest, not unknown in our time, by students dissatisfied with the paucity of library hours.

Bennett's friendship with and cultivation of Dr. John Morrison Reid, a university trustee and former president of Genesee College, aided the struggling library in incalculable ways. Reid gave Bennett \$5,000 for a European book buying trip in 1875

that added 4,500 volumes, tripling the size of the collection almost instantly. It was on the same trip that Bennett first learned of the possible future sale of the library of his former teacher, Leopold von Ranke. We need not dwell at length on the oft-told tale of that improbable acquisition, which placed Syracuse on the bibliothecal map, remains a useful asset to the university, and is a seemingly constant source of cataloging work. It is a tribute to Bennett that he helped negotiate the purchase of the collection during a European trip in 1886, two years after he had left Syracuse. Conspiring with Dr. Reid on strategy, Bennett met with Ranke's son Otto and dealt with the Berlin agents, threatening in mid-course to withdraw the Syracuse offer, the exact extent of which is still unknown.

The collection actually arrived, all nineteen tons, in March 1888, four years into the obscure librarianship of the Reverend Wellesley P. Coddington, originally a professor of modern languages at Genesee College, but translated to professor of Greek at Syracuse in 1871. In addition to his part-time duties as librarian from 1885 to 1889, Coddington offered instruction in Greek, Hebrew, ethics, pedagogy, classical literature, and philosophy. He gave many books to the library and no doubt some of the library's nineteenth-century strengths in classical studies stem from his period, but he left surprisingly little mark on the library in a period that saw the purchase of the Ranke library and the construction of a building to house it. Galpin speculates that "his work was overshadowed by the great achievement of Reid and Bennett in bringing the Ranke books to Syracuse."³ Even Chancellor Sims seems to have played a minor role in that development, star status being reserved for Dr. Reid, who as trustee and member of the trustees' library committee oversaw construction, provided funds for both collection and building, raised funds from others, and appears to have worked closely with a succession of librarians. Most significantly, it was the stipulation, in his anonymous pledge of \$10,000 toward the Ranke acquisition, that required the university to construct a separate fireproof building to house the collection. The final legacy of Mr. and Mrs. Reid was a

bequest of \$100,000 to the university, intended as an endowment for book purchases, the fate of which is now a mystery.

With the appointment of Henry Orrin Sibley in 1889, Syracuse at last had a full-time librarian, though the first five years of his tenure included completion of his doctorate in classics. A late bloomer who graduated from high school at the age of twenty-five, he spent a decade as a principal of public schools and eventually graduated from Syracuse at the age of forty in 1889, the year of his appointment. Apparently a man of some independent means, a poet and translator of classical poetry, Sibley and increasingly his wife Mary (O'Bryan) Sibley presided over a very active period in the history of the library and university until her retirement in 1913, after nine years as acting librarian. The period included the adoption of Dewey classification, the moves into first the Ranke Library Building and later the Carnegie Building, the development of branch libraries, the establishment of the Library School, and the cataloging of the Ranke collection. When Sibley became a virtual invalid from diabetes in 1904, Mrs. Sibley was named acting librarian, the trustees and/or Chancellor Day apparently unwilling to name a woman to the permanent post formerly occupied by her husband, despite her clear competence and experience in the job.

For Henry Sibley's main period of activity, 1889 to 1896, the University Archives has a fairly extensive file of his incoming mail; therefore, this is one of the better documented periods of early library history. Even this one-sided in-basket provides a good picture of the preoccupations of librarianship in the last decade of the nineteenth century, a picture changed today only in respect to technology, and in the number of staff available to carry out the tasks he covered. The correspondence deals with acquisitions, gifts, complaints, job inquiries and applications, interlibrary loan transactions, serial renewal requests, nonreceipt of promised materials, and affairs dealing with the incipient Library School, which in effect Sibley founded. A few examples from these files are illustrative:

14 December 1892, Central City Bookbinding to Sibley: "We have some bills to meet this week & would be very grateful if you can oblige."

4 April 1894, New York State Association Opposed to the Extension of the Suffrage to Women to Sibley: "Accompanying this letter you will receive two volumes of pamphlets: these have been carefully prepared in order to meet the growing demand for information with regard to opposing the extension of the suffrage to Women. You will kindly accept them I trust. . . . (Mrs Geo.) W. Eleanor Phillips, Sec."

11 May 1894, Boston Book Company to Sibley: "Dear sir:--Your letter of the 3rd at hand. We feel that from the whole tone of it that you will not be satisfied with the transaction. You feel that you are sacrificing for \$1.00 volumes that are worth \$3.00. And on the other hand that we are charging you 15c per number for filling only a portion of your defects in Harper's. . . . Possibly it would be better to let the matter drop as we do not care to have any transaction that is not entirely satisfactory. We should like the Methodist Quarterly Review you offer and will ask you to quote us a cash price for the list. . . . Yours very truly, Fred. W. Faxon, Manager, Library Department." [The name Faxon is famous to librarians over the past hundred years as the country's foremost supplier of magazines, journals, and other serials up until its near demise in 1994.]

8 January 1895, *The Brickbuilder* to Sibley: "Dear Sir: In reply to your kind favor of the 4th we will say that we will certainly discontinue sending our journal to the University. We do not know why it should have been sent in opposition to your instructions, and certainly have no disposition to send our journal anywhere where it is not desired, in fact our entire circulation is among paid subscribers. We, of course regret that you do not care to subscribe to us. We cannot understand just why, inasmuch as all the libraries of your class subscribe to us, sometimes to the extent of two or three copies, desiring us as a work of review and general information on the general subject of clay materials as used architecturally. However, doubtless many of the patrons of your library subscribe to us individually, or will do so when they find they cannot obtain us through

your institution. If you will kindly send us the back numbers we will certainly be very grateful. . . . They are very valuable to us.” At some point that error was rectified, or at least countermanded, for we do have a complete run acquired later in hard copy and microform, as well as its successor, *Architectural Forum*.

15 March 1895, from Cornell University Library to Sibley: “Dear Sir: In an attempt to collect the names of works of fiction on American Colleges, I find that in one case I can not find any trace. About 1887, ‘88 or ‘89, I should guess, there came out in some magazine (more than one number or not I do not know) a work of fiction, I believe on life at Syracuse University. I have an idea the work was entitled A or The College Widow, but of this, too, I am not sure. Another peculiar thing I retain is that the volume is Blackwood’s, Blackwell’s, Blacks or similar name or else the cover of the number in which the work of fiction appeared was in pronounced black letters and artistic work on white or very light paper. This is all very uncertain in my mind, the only thing I am sure of is that some years ago I saw a work of fiction in a magazine on the life in some American College probably Syracuse University. . . . Could you assist me? Do not put yourself to any trouble . . . L. Nelson Nicholas, Asst. Lib.” Sibley could well have used such a classically ill-defined reference question in his introductory courses in library economy, along with other classic quests such as Darwin’s *Oranges & Peaches* and the works of Henry Gibson.

27 March 1896, Thomas Durston, Bookseller, to Mrs. Sibley: “Dear Madam:--On receipt of your letter this morning, I called up the errand-boy, and he says the book was delivered Feb. 18th: taken to the University Library building, and delivered to a fleshy gentleman with whiskers, which I suppose means Mr. Sibley. . . . [see fig. 4] The books must be in the building somewhere, or else some one has taken them away. They were certainly delivered.”

Around that time the file ends and we have no such sources for the remainder of the Sibleys’ regime. We can speculate that Durston’s errant books were symptomatic of

the chaos that was prevalent in the Ranke Library during its early period. Here is Galpin's account⁴ from Dr. Bennett's time: "If the complaints of one student in the *University Herald* be correct, things were pretty bad at times. When the librarian was busy elsewhere, students invaded the forbidden wire 'cage' where the books were kept; periodicals and newspapers were not returned to their proper places, and upperclassmen dumped their coats in the crowded reading room. Even worse, there was too much 'vociferous soliloquy, boisterous conversation, or gymnastic creation,' such as clearing two tables at a single bound, mimicking the cry of a savage [no doubt a reference to the Saltine Warrior]. The conduct of the gentlemen seems to have upset at least some of the ladies, one of whom protested that the men crowded them from the tables and even stared at them! Another complained that every morning after Chapel, the gentlemen were admitted to the library at once, while the ladies had to stand out in the hall exposed to 'frightful din' or even take refuge in the dressing room until the door on their side was opened."

A few years later on 4 July 1891, Sibley, writing during his summer vacation in Royalton, New York, expressed to Dean of Liberal Arts John R. French his concerns about the state of the library: "The Chancellor said something before I went away about putting biology in the upper rooms of the library, I do so hope he won't. Those great sonorous rooms--one can scarcely walk across without it sounds like the rolling of a cannon shot. The constant stream of students going up and down, with their talking & standing in the entry, would just about spoil the Library for reading & study. It almost made me sick when I heard of it. Ours is a great Library, it will be one of the best in this country. I firmly believe it, and to have something introduced that will just about spoil its efficiency is too bad. . . . The least word spoken in those upper rooms is heard as in a speaking gallery. . . . Students before & after class will be around in the rooms, not under the librarian's authority & the noise made--the very thought of it appals me. I hope this will not be done. I must write a letter of protest. . . . It may seem that this is none of my

business, but considering *as I do* that the very existence of my dept., its entire usefulness depends upon the absence of noise. I can not but feel justified in protesting. Remember how the opening of the Ranke boxes disturbed you and imagine such a noise day after day, year after year. O please join me in protest. Sibley.”

Crowding in library spaces for books, staff, and readers has been endemic throughout the history of the library. It is ironic that the expansion of the Ranke Library by the addition of a west wing was completed only two years before the beginning of Carnegie construction, work which Mrs. Sibley saw to completion and occupation in 1907 (see fig. 5). The best account of Chancellor Day’s indefatigable and ultimately successful pursuit of Andrew Carnegie is in Galpin, volume two. It almost didn’t happen. Chancellor Day’s emissary to Carnegie, the Reverend James D. Phelps, went to New York with instructions to ask for a chemistry building, but Phelps offered a choice between a chemistry building and a library. The outcome, knowing Carnegie’s penchant for libraries, would seem to be foreordained, and eventually Carnegie’s secretary wrote to say that Mr. Carnegie “will be glad to pay for the erection of a Library Building at cost of One Hundred and Fifty Thousand Dollars, provided the amount of One Hundred and Fifty Thousand Dollars endowment is raised towards the upkeep and carrying on of the Library,” a leveraging technique that Carnegie employed very successfully a few years later at the New York Public Library.

Matching funds were raised, Carnegie’s funds transmitted, and construction completed in 1907, slightly over budget. We need not be detained by the details, except to note the manner in which the “endowment” funds were used. The trustees approved the use of the endowment funds, provided primarily by John D. Archbold, to finance construction of Sims Hall as a residence for men, the income to be used for support of the library. The residence opened the same fall of 1907, completed at a cost of \$115,000, and containing single and double rooms, a kitchen, and a dining room for 250 students. I have found no evidence of how or even if the income was ever designated for library purposes,

and the investment certainly represents no part of the library's current income stream, except perhaps by the most attenuated of trickle-down theories. Self-serving as it may appear, I would contend that the donor's intentions were not honored, just as they were not honored with the bequest of Mr. and Mrs. Reid. Several smaller restricted endowments from the early period, notably the Mace Fund, are still among the library's discretionary accounts, but by some hidden acts of legerdemain the use of these larger accounts has been totally obscured by history.

There is an eerie congruence between the initial euphoria and the quick disillusionment that followed the openings of both the Ranke Library and the Carnegie Library, and perhaps in hindsight it will appear appropriate that the Carnegie Building was never dedicated. That event should now await the building's eventual renovation as a twenty-first-century science library, possibly on the centennial of its groundbreaking. Although at the time of its opening the librarian of the University of Pennsylvania declared Carnegie to be the best designed academic library building in the country, the evidence of dissatisfaction is almost as long as the century and is included in each of the last nine reports of the Senate Library Committee, from 1986 to 1995. A few accounts of these valleys of despair should be evocative for those of you who knew the building and the ways in which it was used.

On 18 June 1946 the *Post-Standard* published brief recollections of Burges Johnson who served for a time as professor of English and director of public relations. Here is his account of Carnegie, taken from his book *Campus vs. Classroom*: "I met the chancellor [Flint] on the campus one day, and pointed to the library building which, built under Chancellor Day's regime, happens to be one of the worst designed library buildings I have ever had the ill-fortune to see. 'Chancellor,' said I, 'have I your permission to come up here some dark night with two sticks of dynamite and blow that building higher than Gilderoy's kite?' 'No,' said he promptly, 'set fire to it, so that I can get the insurance.'"

Swinburne scholar Cecil Lang, newly arrived in Syracuse in 1960, told the Daily Orange “that he likes Syracuse very much. Even the weather doesn’t bother him very much, he added. What he dislikes about Syracuse most however, he said, is the library. The library facilities here are ‘abominable.’”

Perhaps that is unfair from someone who had spent his earlier academic life luxuriating in the libraries of Duke, Harvard, and Yale and eventually left us for the greener pastures of Charlottesville. Nonetheless, the comment is telling, as are those of Professor Emerita Mary Marshall who, despite her glowing accolades to the library, published in the *Alumni News* of March 1956, reports that the library on her arrival here in 1948 was simply unprepared to support the many graduate research programs then developing. Her view was that the practice of placing all book selection decisions in the hands of faculty was a recipe for disaster, especially in light of the faculty’s frequent failure to use all of the funds available.

Finally, poet Philip Booth in the *Daily Orange* of 24 September 1964: The better young teachers “are here on the assumption that the university is committed to becoming no less than first rate. . . And, except for the library, the evidence has been all in that direction since I’ve been here.”

Before closing, I want to share the credo of Wharton Miller (librarian and dean of the Library School from 1927 to 1955), printed in the “Staff Bulletin” and presented to his staff in the midst of financial retrenchment in September 1931: “It must never be lost sight of that the Library exists to serve its public now and for all time. It couldn’t operate in a vacuum. In all smoothing out processes let that be held always in view. Time is never too short to help a student. No student must be turned away with an evasive answer. Library machinery must never interfere with personal contact between the Library and its public. Let the reader emerge.” That is as good a coda as I can find, especially in this year of the student, to define the predominating ethos of this library and its librarians over the past 125 years.

FOOTNOTES

University Librarian David H. Stam has been at Syracuse University since 1986. Throughout the 1995-96 academic year he has been a British Library Fellow and in March 1996 presented a talk on “Leigh Hunt’s Libraries and Their Diaspora” at the British Library. Before coming to Syracuse Stam was the Andrew W. Mellon Director of the Research Libraries at the New York Public Library. He earned his doctorate in English history at Northwestern University in 1978.

1. W. Freeman Galpin wrote the first two volumes: *Syracuse University: The Pioneer Days* (1952), and *Syracuse University: The Growing Days* (1960). The third volume, *Syracuse University: The Critical Years* (1984), based on notes by Galpin and Oscar T. Barck Jr., was edited and revised by Richard Wilson. All three volumes were published by Syracuse University Press.

2. Galpin, *Syracuse University: The Pioneer Days*, 90.

3. *Ibid.*, 99.

4. *Ibid.*, 98-9.