

The Librarians of Congress: Past and Future

by

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Librarians of Congress have been poets, playwrights, journalists, bureaucrats, politicians, historians, and indeed, librarians. They have frequently functioned as cultural ambassadors to the world, and perhaps, as the de facto Secretary of Culture.

Backgrounds, experience, press releases, official pronouncements and pontifications aside, the Librarian of Congress' job is complex and difficult. The Library he¹ administers is quite literally the library of the Congress, and its members are proud of having it within their purview. The Congress reviews the Library's work and its leadership's performance and has oversight for its budget, policies and procedures. The Library of Congress is also a Federal agency, one that is located in the Legislative Branch, along with the Congressional Budget Office, the Government Printing Office, the General Accounting Office, and the Architect of the Capitol. Yet, the Library of Congress is also unofficially this country's national library, and among national libraries, it is by far the largest.²

Even while the Library of Congress is a mega-library, it is much more than a library. The Library of the Congress houses other separate or nearly separate organizations, including the Congressional Research Service (CRS), the U.S. Copyright Office, the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, the Law Library, and the Federal Research Division. The Library of Congress is, in a sense, a corporation with a number of subsidiaries, one that has an internal board of directors in the form of the Joint Committee on the Library and the Legislative Branch Appropriations Committee. In reality, however, each of the 535 Members of Congress has a stake in the Library. Even though the Library may not be on the minds of

¹ Each of the 13 Librarians of Congress has been a man.

² The "library" part of the Library of Congress includes numerous public reading rooms where patrons use the collections and the services of the reference staff. In its acquisition of collections, the Library is comprehensive through U.S. copyright deposit and through gifts, exchanges, and purchases abroad. The collections number more than 130 million items, including more than 29 million books and some 78 million special collections of maps, photographs, films, manuscripts, and sound recordings.

Members daily, given other pressing responsibilities, they share a pride of ownership. The Librarian of Congress reports to the Congress as the head of an agency in the Legislative branch.

Subject to the advice and consent of the Senate, the President of the United States appoints the Librarian of Congress. The appointment has no term limit, although Librarians have been replaced or have retired when new Presidents assumed office. Tenures of previous librarians have run the gamut from three (John Gould Stephenson) to 40 years (Herbert Putnam). John Meeham and Ainsworth Spofford served 32 years and 33 years respectively, but eight Librarians served terms less than 15 years (John Beckley, Patrick Magruder, George Watterson, John Stephenson, John Russell Young, Archibald MacLeish, Luther Evans, and Daniel Boorstin). James Billington, the present Librarian of Congress, matched Quincy Mumford's 20-year tenure in January 2007. Two Librarians died in office (Beckley and Young), four retired from the position (Spofford, Putnam, Mumford, and Boorstin), and six resigned for other reasons (Magruder, Watterston, Meeham, Stephenson, MacLeish, and Evans). It is not in their length of service, however, but in their remarkable contributions, unrealized goals, and unintended legacies, that the changes in the role of the Librarian of Congress and the Library itself are revealed. It is illuminating to look back at other librarians of Congress to discover why they were appointed and at the Library itself, as it grew from Jefferson's collection into the largest library in the world.

1802-1864: Pure Political Appointees.

Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States, appointed the first two Librarians of Congress, who also had the title of Clerk of the House of Representatives. John Beckley, the first Librarian of Congress, had been Jefferson's campaign manager, and Patrick Magruder, also a Jefferson supporter, had been a member of Congress. James Madison, the 4th President and a Whig, appointed George Watterson, who served 14 years through the tenure of three Presidents (Madison, James Monroe, and John Quincy Adams). Watterson, however, became passionate in his opposition to the 7th President, Andrew Jackson, who reacted by replacing Watterson with John Meeham, a fellow Democrat. Amazingly, Meeham served the nine next presidents, four of whom were Democrats and four, Whigs. The last president Meeham served, James Buchanan,

was a Republican as was Abraham Lincoln, who would become the 16th president. Even with this political commonality, Lincoln replaced Meeham with John Gould Stephenson, a Republican physician, who was active in politics in Terre Haute, Indiana. Stephenson served as an officer in the Civil War during his tenure as Librarian of Congress and resigned after three years. Early on, Stephenson had appointed Ainsworth Spofford as chief assistant librarian, and Spofford succeeded Stephenson, as one of only two Librarians to be appointed from within the Library of Congress.³

In effect, during the first 62 years that the position of Librarian of Congress existed (1802-1864), the five librarians, who served 16 presidents, were purely political appointees, not even what were then called *bookmen* and certainly not librarians. Another chapter began to unfold when Spofford campaigned successfully to become the 6th Librarian of Congress.

1864 – 1987: Mixed Backgrounds and Experience.

Ainsworth Rand Spofford, a book dealer and journalist from Cincinnati, worked for Stephenson and had gained significant responsibilities while Stephenson served in the Civil War. Spofford, who was 39 years old, decided that he wanted to be the Librarian of Congress. He mounted a successful campaign to get President Lincoln to appoint him. Spofford not only served for 33 years, the second longest tenure in the position, but when he stepped down in 1897, it was to the position of chief assistant librarian which he held until his death at 83. Spofford expanded the Library's collections in various ways, including moving library materials from the Smithsonian to the Library of Congress and getting approved legislation whereby the Library of Congress became the nation's sole copyright registering center and depository for copyrighted materials. During his tenure the original Library building, now called the Jefferson building, was constructed.

The next Librarian of Congress, John Russell Young, who had political connections with Ulysses Grant and others, was appointed by President McKinley and served but two years until he died. After Young's death, McKinley appointed Herbert Putman, who had the longest tenure of any

³ Luther Evans is the other Librarian appointed from within the Library of Congress staff.

Librarian of Congress, 40 years. Son of the publishing scion George Palmer Putnam, Herbert Putnam was 38 years old when appointed. He was educated at Harvard and had been the director of the Minnesota Public Library and the Boston Public Library.⁴ Among other achievements, Putnam established the Library of Congress classification system, created the National Union Catalog, and began to lend the Library's collections to other libraries for use by the public. Putnam was popular with his staff and librarians across the country during the first part of his tenure, but as his tenure lengthened without him giving word of retiring, the internal operations of the Library stagnated. Supposedly, even President Roosevelt wondered when he would leave. In 1939, Putnam retired at the age of 78.

In terms of overall achievements, Archibald MacLeish, who served the Library during World War II, stands out as perhaps the most extraordinarily successful Librarian of Congress. Appointed by President Roosevelt, he was a poet and playwright who won three Pulitzer prizes and was a wartime advisor to the President. MacLeish actually spent only six years as Librarian of Congress, and, for the better part of his Library tenure, held concurrent positions in the government. MacLeish was opposed vigorously (and some would say inappropriately) by the American Library Association (ALA), which had sponsored its own candidate. MacLeish, who received a standing ovation from participants at the ALA conference just a year later, proved to be highly popular with Library staff and librarians across the country. He assembled an effective senior management group, reinvigorated a disheartened staff through reorganization, codified the objectives of the Library, provided ways for staff to give input, and convened distinguished university librarians to advise him. When MacLeish resigned in 1944, Roosevelt appointed him Assistant Secretary of State for Cultural and Public Affairs.

MacLeish, like John Stephenson, unknowingly recruited his successor, Luther Evans, as the head of what was then called the Legislative Reference Service (now the Congressional Reference Service) and had promoted him to the position of Chief Assistant Librarian. Appointed as Librarian of Congress by President Truman in 1945, Evans held a doctorate in political science from Stanford University. He had been the director of the Historical Records Survey, a program

⁴ Many librarians hoped that Putnam's appointment was a recognition that experience as a librarian was an important component of a Librarian of Congress' qualifications; in fact, only three Librarians of Congress have had

in the Works Progress Administration. Well respected by Library staff, his eight-year tenure has been described as ‘an extension of the MacLeish years’.⁵ He sought standing for the Library internationally and was responsible for obtaining extensive European publications from the war period for the Library’s collections. Evans personal style apparently was blunt, and he held strong opinions, but he mingled with staff and sought their opinions as well. He believed strongly in an open democracy and opposed Senator Joseph McCarthy; but ultimately, Evans created a Loyalty Review Board, which operated at the Library of Congress from 1947 to 1953. Evans resigned in 1953 to become the 3rd director-general of UNESCO.

Dwight Eisenhower selected Quincy Mumford, the only Librarian of Congress to hold a degree in librarianship (B.S. in Library Science from Columbia University) when appointed. He was the director of the Cleveland Public Library. Members of Congress had not been satisfied with Evans’ tenure for a number of reasons, including what they saw as an inappropriate expansion of the Library’s role nationally and internationally. Mumford refused to give ground on the need for the Library’s national role and maintained that the Library of Congress had the dual role of serving the Congress and the nation as a whole. During Mumford’s tenure the issue of moving the Library to the Executive Branch surfaced through a report that Senator Claiborne Pell had requested from a Harvard University library official.⁶ Mumford vigorously defended the Library being a part of the Legislative Branch, and the Congress, pleased, subsequently appropriated funding for a third Library building and a significant increase in acquisitions funding. The growth of the Library under Mr. Mumford was unprecedented, with the annual budget increasing from \$9,400,000 to \$96,696,000 during his tenure.

On the negative side, when the Congressional Research Service was given more independence under Mumford, a cultural split occurred between the Library proper and CRS, one that many would agree exists even today.⁷ Allegations of racial discrimination began to surface and would

a background working in libraries.

⁵ *Encyclopedia of the Library of Congress*, pp. 230-241.

⁶ In a Brookings Institution survey Luther Evans directed after he left the Library, he also recommended moving the Library of Congress to the Executive Branch where he believed it would receive stronger support.

⁷ The cultural split actually began during Luther Evans tenure when the Legislative Reference Service, as it was then called, was made a special unit. Daniel Boorstin, the 12th Librarian of Congress, supposedly said that having the Congressional Research Service in the Library of Congress was a bit like having a piranha in the pond: every other unit needed to quicken its pace.

affect the tenures of the next two Librarians as the complaints ultimately grew into a class action discrimination suit that, during James Billington's tenure, was settled with the largest award ever given for such a suit in the Federal government.⁸ Mumford, who served in a period of great national growth, left the Library in 1974 at age 71.

President Gerald Ford appointed Daniel Boorstin, a historian who was educated at Harvard, Oxford and Yale, to be the 12th Librarian of Congress. The ALA did not endorse Boorstin's appointment because he lacked the background and experience of a librarian, and used its testimony to put on the record what it thought about the leadership and direction of the Library.⁹ The Senate approved the appointment without debate. It stipulated, however, that Boorstin, who was a prolific author and Pulitzer Prize winner, could not write books during his workday at the Library of Congress. A populist, Boorstin invited the public to use the Library of Congress' reading rooms literally by opening the bronze front doors that lead into the Great Hall of the Jefferson Building. He made the Library a center for intellectual activity in Washington by hosting public events and by creating a national Council of Scholars and the Center for the Book, which is a network of state organizations dedicated to books and reading. He reorganized the Library to strengthen interactions among various constituencies, and he obtained significant funding from the Congress to renovate both the Jefferson and Adams buildings. During Mr. Boorstin's tenure the racial climate at the Library worsened, and eventually the class action was certified at the end of his tenure.

James Billington, the current incumbent, has a distinguished record as Librarian of Congress. First educated in the Philadelphia public schools, he graduated from Princeton University, was a Rhodes scholar at Oxford, served in the U.S. Army, taught both at Harvard and Princeton, and was the director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C. before being appointed Librarian of Congress by President Ronald Reagan. Billington's legacy will be an exceptional one, and his achievements have come about during massive changes in

⁸ It is worth remembering that Barbara Ringer, who eventually became a distinguished Register of Copyrights and first woman to be Register, obtained her position after filing a suit alleging discrimination because of sex, when she was an applicant for the Register position and was not appointed. The District Court ruled in her favor and she served as Register for 13 years (1973-1980) and Interim Register during 1993-94. She guided the monumental 4th revision of the U.S. Copyright law signed by President Ford in 1976.

culture from the development of technology and particularly the World Wide Web. Early in his tenure, Billington made the Library's electronic catalog available to the public and, with direction from then Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, created THOMAS, a publicly available database that records the work of the Congress. Billington envisaged sharing the Library's massive special collections with the public, and through the American Memory program, more than 10 million maps, musical scores, films, manuscripts, and images are now freely available on the Web. His ability to coax funds from the Congress is legendary; most recently evident is an appropriation of almost \$100 million to develop a national preservation program for born-digital objects, resources created digitally.¹⁰ In addition, through the Madison Council, a private fundraising group he created, Billington received \$60 million from John Kluge to create the Kluge Center for Scholars, and \$120 million from David Packard to build a conservation and access facility for recorded sound and film in Culpepper, Virginia. This Librarian's achievements are consistent with those of many of his distinguished predecessors, and he has built his legacy, as have other Librarians, on inherited challenges he has addressed and opportunities he has exploited.

The Next Librarian of Congress

When the 44th President of the United States assumes office in January 2009, Billington, the 13th Librarian of Congress, will be but four months away from his 80th birthday. If he is still serving, Billington will be the oldest person to hold that office since it was created in 1802. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that due to retirement, politics or both, interested communities may want to think about leadership requirements for the next Librarian of Congress.

In our time, the technology environment has evolved rapidly, and libraries around the world have been among the leading public institutions to transform themselves to meet new demands. The Library of Congress is no exception. Its future leaders will continue to grapple with the demands of collecting, preserving, and making accessible precious analog and digital materials, some of which may be available nowhere else in the world.

⁹ The present Librarian of Congress is a Russian scholar, and when his hearing took place in 1987, the ALA remained neutral.

But she or he also will face issues that are difficult to identify today and that will demand energetic leadership both in new and traditional communities as well as a keen ability to manage the internal affairs of a large and complicated organization. To offer this leadership position with no term limit and without a determination of the leadership characteristics that best match the needs of the institution could deprive the Library of the leadership capabilities it will require during the next decade.

Term or term limit

If there were to be a term limit for the position, as some have suggested, a Librarian's appointment would move closer to the national political process and could, as in the first 62 years, become a reward from a new President to a political supporter.¹¹ Others believe that a limited term might bring capable library professionals into the top leadership position, as has happened in other national libraries, e.g., the British Library. Short of creating a term limit, the Congress, through the Joint Committee on the Library, could create an internal review process for the Librarian of Congress, that could be invoked at the end of an appointment term not to exceed ten years, normally. A new term could follow a favorable review.

The argument that Evans and others have made to move the Library of Congress to the Executive Branch supports a limited term for the Librarian of Congress as well as a push toward professional library leadership. However, it could also force the Library to leave behind the Congressional Research Service, which would continue to report directly to the Congress. Some have suggested also that any change in the Library of Congress' structure might result in other Library units, specifically the U.S. Copyright Office, to be merged with the U.S. Patent Office. There are few advocates for a change in the location of the Library.

¹⁰ National Digital Information Infrastructure and Preservation Program (NDIIPP).

¹¹ The head of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), an Executive branch agency, is appointed by the President with the advice and consent of the Senate, as is the Librarian of Congress. But, NARA's chief executive officer may be removed from office at any time by the President, who is only required to communicate the reason to the Senate and to the House. There is no specified procedure for removing the head of the Library of Congress.

It is critical, however, for the House Administration Committee and the Senate Rules Committee to review the current Librarian of Congress' compensation, which presently is \$168,000 under Executive Schedule II¹² before its members seek candidates for the next Librarian of Congress. According to the Association for Research Libraries 2005 statistics, eight university librarians are presently paid annual salaries of over \$250,000. Chief Information Officers and university or foundation presidents, all potential candidates, are paid much higher salaries than are these eight university librarians. A better overall compensation package for the Librarian of Congress could be coupled with a "soft" term limit in order to attract a larger pool of qualified candidates who may not view the position as a terminal career move.

Leadership requirements

The next Librarian of Congress should be committed to leading a national library coordinated with a nation-wide network of libraries and research institutions. Among the overall qualities of any candidate should be a belief that the Library of Congress is a visible symbol of democracy. Collections, information services, cultural and educational programs that help to nurture and educate citizens, serve a broad public good. Any viable candidate should also understand that service to the Congress is of primary importance; she or he should be an advocate for adequate funding and internal Library support for the Congressional Research Service and should commit to serving the Congress from all parts of the Library. Any serious candidate would need to interact well with the Congress, the Administration and its relevant agencies, the library and scholarly communities, publishers and other information providers, and especially the staff, manifesting an abiding and real commitment to diversity. These are all basic requirements for serving Congress and the nation

In addition, the candidate should also have a record of proven talent for creatively managing a large and diverse organization and commit to seeking ways to gather advice regularly and consistently from constituents nation-wide who use or want to use the organization's collections and services; the candidate should also be committed to constructing an effective senior

¹² www.opm.gov/oca/07tables/html/ex.asp.

management team that would help to realize the goals of the institution and of the Congress. One of the many strengths of the Library of Congress is that it is normally unaffected by changes of political party or of key individuals in the Executive or Legislative branches. But precisely because it is not a place where citizens can “throw the bums out”, the Librarian has a special responsibility to hear and respond faithfully to the voices of the staff, to those who use the Library’s collections and services as students, scholars, or Members of Congress, and to those who are experts in fields that need the Library of Congress or where the Library of Congress needs them, including librarians, technologists, and scholars. Creating an outside board of advisors to address this complex set of constituent communities, such as have the National Library of Medicine and the British Library, could foster better communication nationally and bring new ideas into the Library.

Advocate for the public

Above and beyond these qualities, the next Librarian of Congress will need to exercise strong leadership to convince the Congress that discovery, learning, and scholarship in our country are dependant on balancing the rights of copyright holders with fair use.

The U.S. Constitution gives Congress the power “to promote the Progress of Science and useful arts by securing for limited times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries.” The first copyright term in 1790 was limited to 14 years. Through the years the term increased and by 1976 copyright had been extended to the life of the author plus 50 years (75 years for corporate authorship). In 1998, the Copyright Term Extension Act (also called Sonny Bono Act) extended copyright to the life of the author plus 70 years (95 years for corporate authorship). The act also affected works published prior to January 1, 1978 by increasing their term by 20 years. While the appropriate balance between fair use and rights of creators can and should be debated, it is difficult not to see that the balance has tilted strongly toward the copyright holders in recent years.

Our Cultural Commonwealth, a recent report of the American Council of Learned Societies¹³, documents the urgent need to build a strong cyberinfrastructure to support digital scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. It lists the current copyright laws as a major barrier both to digital scholarship and to preserving the country's heritage. The prospect of creating a "unified cultural record online" is presently blocked by excessive terms of copyright and by renewals that are automatically extended. Current copyright laws keep most twentieth-century works from becoming available in digital form, so the creative output of our country's artists and scholars cannot be studied online. Humanists, while often described as loners in their research, are becoming increasingly collaborative, and large-scale work is being accomplished digitally with new paths of research emerging that were impossible in an analog world. Excessive privatization of digital objects of all kinds impedes research and discovery by children in kindergarten, adults with learning goals, and students and faculty of all molds.

The Library of Congress has been a significant national contributor of digitized analog content on the Web and a leader in researching how to preserve born-digital materials. The next Librarian of Congress should seek to build relationships nationally and internationally with individuals and institutions to ensure that redundant archives of digital content of all types exist to safeguard the history of our country. But, even more important, the 14th Librarian of Congress should assume the leadership on the public's behalf to advocate strongly for fair use. Many organizations and individuals are working diligently on a variety of copyright issues and legislation, but there is presently an absence of a national voice to represent the public's right to find and use all kinds of knowledge materials in all formats without barriers. As the Chief Executive Officer of the Library of Congress, the Librarian is charged to hold the U.S. Copyright Office accountable for balance in its work. But as the visible symbol of libraries and learning in the United States, the Librarian of Congress should also be the nation's voice for advocating fair use. That voice needs to be heard in every state and through every medium but especially in Congressional offices and Congressional hearings on copyright.

¹³ *Our Cultural Commonwealth*: the Final Report of the American Council of Learned Societies Commission on Cyberinfrastructure for the Humanities and Social Sciences. (www.acls.org)

Ainsworth Spofford was brilliant with his strategy to make the Library of Congress the sole depository for copyrighted works, because the Library's collections are now preeminent in the world. The next Librarian of Congress must ensure that these magnificent collections, as well as the extensive resources of all the nation's libraries, are available digitally to the American public for their educational and cultural edification instead of being "protected" for increasingly lengthy copyright terms that favor copyright holders, including corporations, over the American public's need to use digital resources for educational, research, and cultural purposes.

Librarians of Congress

<i>Name</i>	<i>President Who Appointed</i>	<i>Years of Service</i>	<i>Tenure in Years</i>	<i>Age Entered</i>	<i>Age Left</i>	<i>Age Died</i>	<i>Reason Left</i>
Beckley	Jefferson	1802-1807	5	45	50	50	died
Magruder	Jefferson	1807-1815	8	39	47	51	resigned*
Watterson	Madison	1815-1829	14	43	57	71	resigned*
Meeham	Jackson	1829-1861	32	39	71	73	resigned*
Stephenson	Lincoln	1861-1864	3	33	36	54	resigned
Spofford	Lincoln	1864-1897	32	39	71	83	resigned**
Young	McKinley	1897-1899	2	57	59	59	died
Putnam	McKinley	1899-1939	40	38	78	94	resigned***
MacLeish	Roosevelt	1939-1944	5	47	52	90	resigned****
Evans	Truman	1945-1953	8	40	48	79	resigned****
Mumford	Eisenhower	1954-1974	20	51	71	79	resigned***
Boorstin	Ford	1975-1987	12	61	73	89	resigned***
Billington	Reagan	1987-		58			

- * replaced with another political appointee
- ** took the position of chief assistance librarian until his death
- *** retired
- **** took other government and academic positions

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