

Report of the Council

FOR MORE years than some of us here care to remember, we have gathered in this room to hear Clarence Brigham report on the principal happenings of the twelve months past. Surely for us the most significant event of this year has been his death, on August 13. Even had he not been one of the greatest bibliographers and librarians this country has produced, the mere length of his connection with this Society would have been significant. On the day in October, 1905, when he was elected to the Society, the then librarian gave his recollections of the burlesque performance of the surrender of Cornwallis by the local militia companies. This makes us today only two lives and one quick memory away from the Revolution.

In 1905 the American Antiquarian Society was an organization for social meetings and the reading of papers. Since the death of Christopher Columbus Baldwin in 1835, little attention had been paid to the development of the library. Although the book funds were very small, one of them had been doubled by the accumulation of interest because no effort was made to spend it. There were about 100,000 books on the shelves, but the bulk of those acquired since Baldwin's death were the sweepings and discards from private libraries, in no way related to the field of American antiquities. The core of treasure gathered by Thomas and Baldwin was buried in trash.

In 1907 the control of the Society's policies passed into the hands of Waldo Lincoln, John Franklin Jameson, and William MacDonald, who, as a step toward reviving its activity, obtained \$800 from the Council for the purpose of



Clarence S. Brigham

preparing an edition of the royal proclamations relating to America. To edit this work they chose Clarence Brigham, the young librarian of the Rhode Island Historical Society, who spent a summer in England preparing the text of the volume and a report so clear and convincing that in October of 1908, he was chosen librarian, only the third to hold office in seventy years. In reporting his election, the Council said that this, in conjunction with the assurance that the Society would have a new building, indicated that it was about "to enter upon an enlarged, prosperous and useful career."

Brigham's philosophy of librarianship, as expressed in a paper read before the American Historical Association three years later, was to collect actively in limited fields. His term as librarian of the Society was to begin in January, 1909, but in the preceding December he went to the Pennypacker sale at which he bought 500 Pennsylvania almanacs for the Library. Indeed, in that one year he tripled the almanac holdings of the Society. His first report as librarian, read in October, 1909, was a trumpet of revolution which must have shaken the dust out of the folios on the most distant shelves. His second report laid down a concrete plan of action, calling for the collection of every early American imprint, however trivial, and of newspapers, almanacs, genealogies, and American local history.

These were fields in which no library was then systematically collecting, fields which had a potential value as source material not yet recognized by most professional historians. In these fields Brig could build to strength because of the collecting done by Thomas and Baldwin; but he had little with which to build, for the annual income of the funds earmarked for genealogy, for example, was \$25, and for local history, only \$50. Moreover, there was, at the moment, no place to put the books which he was acquiring.

The old building in Lincoln Square was filled to the roof, and even after the dispersal of the museum, the possessions of the Society just about comfortably filled the present building, into which Brig moved the collections during the winter of 1910-11, shelving most of the books himself in order to be sure that it was done correctly. Logically, by his own statement of policy, his next steps should have been to weed out the irrelevant foreign material and to reclassify the Americana. He did prepare a plan of reclassification, but all through his librarianship and Mr. Vail's the books remained grouped by their old alcove numbers. Instead, he rushed to collect. His first point of attack was American printing before 1821, which was being then mapped by Charles Evans' *American Bibliography*, which he eventually sponsored. In two years he acquired, with the aid of our friends in the antiquarian book trade, more early American imprints than Thomas had been able to cull from attics in a life-time of collecting. Eventually he was able to see our holdings in that field increase eleven-fold.

Brigham began his study of Paul Revere engravings in 1912. He had found in the library a small collection of American prints given by Nathaniel Paine, but our present collection of the graphic arts is almost entirely his gathering. As early as 1915 he was searching for early American book-plates and trade cards. In 1934 he acquired the Percy Sabin collection of caricature, which meant that hereafter we had only to fill in the chinks. This was typical of his method of collection. He would take a field in which Thomas had left us the bare cornerstones, and would buy the largest collection to become available, usually at a time when interest in that field was low. Then he could set out to fill the gaps. Thus in 1952 by the purchase of the Spiro collection he gave us the largest institutional holdings of colonial and Revolutionary paper money.

In 1910, Brig induced the New England Historic Genealogical Society to give us its large map collection, and when to this were added the Farwell and Streeter gifts, we had, with very few individual purchases, a strong collection of early American cartography. It was in 1913 that he plunged into newspaper collecting, which was to be his great love. From Thomas we had inherited the strongest collection of eighteenth century American newspapers, but the period between his death and the end of the century was hardly represented on our shelves. In 1914 Brig acquired twelve tons of newspapers, mainly of this blank period. Harvard, attracted by this show of energy, then turned over to us a great collection of South American newspapers. The most fruitful year of his newspaper collecting was 1925. Eventually he trebled the size of the original collections and made our holdings for the pre-1821 period four times as large as those of any rival.

Since his first collecting efforts in this field, Brig had been busy compiling his bibliography, spending many a hot day crawling around in the attics of Southern court-houses in search of files.

His first draft of the bibliography began to appear in the *Proceedings* for 1927, but twenty years more were spent in revision before the great work appeared in its familiar form. It is, as you all know, a work of the most incredible scholarship and thoroughness. When last year it was reprinted, only a handful of corrections and additions was necessary.

The Harvard gift of newspapers filled the stack and created a space crisis at a time when the funds for even the purchase of books were drying up. In 1919 Brig weathered a financial crisis and gained some space by selling tons of duplicate newspapers, and by increasing his calls upon old friends. With the completion of the second bookstack in 1924, although he had already doubled the number of books

in the Library, he proclaimed a new era and plunged again into collecting, in spite of the fact that the material moved out of storage had filled the new stack. Indeed, Clarence could, like the rest of us, bark up the wrong tree and get into a blind alley; by ignoring his own proclaimed principles of collecting, he had some resounding successes in this direction. As early as 1908 he was greatly interested in building up the Spanish-American collection, and the gift of the Harvard newspapers spurred him on. As late as 1924 he acquired a large collection of recent South American government documents. The field is, of course, too vast for any one library, and no one comes to this part of the country to work in it.

As late as 1915, Brig was trying to preserve here an absolutely complete collection of current United States government publications. Another blind alley was his attempt to obtain everything relating to American participation in World War I. His efforts did result in the acquiring of fine files of army newspapers, but they were last consulted in 1940, and today would fall to pieces if the volumes were opened. In 1926 he accessioned 16,000 recent institutional reports, and as late as 1940 was permitting the staff to operate on the principle that everything printed or mimeographed on the two American continents should be preserved in this Library.

Brigham never paid much attention to the problem of keeping abreast of the current publications of secondary works in American history, arguing that since most distinguished American historians were members of the Society, we would get presentation copies of their books. Actually, so far as the field of early American history was concerned, this attitude was not unreasonable, in his day. Down to the late forties he kept unfilled places on the membership list because qualified candidates could not be found,

and any historian whom I detected showing an interest in the early American field could be promptly elected.

In 1922 the acquisition of collections of city directories discarded by other libraries started Brig on the path of collecting which resulted in our unrivaled holdings in this field and in the Spear bibliography. This was a typical example of his realization of the utility of a class of source material which was being ignored by other librarians and by most historians.

In 1923 the acquisition of twenty-three New England Primers set Brig to building what is now by far the largest collection. Three years later a lucky purchase of early American children's literature plunged him into a field in which, with great aid from several members, he, after thirty years' work, built up the strongest collection. In 1923 the Library also received a gift of two lots of autographed copies of nineteenth century literature, which started Brig on a First Editions collection based on the Foley bibliography. In 1928 alone he bought 2,000 volumes in this field. When Lyle Wright's plan for a bibliography of early American fiction was first announced, Brig realized the potentiality of these novels for historical source material, and set out to buy madly. Many times have I seen dealers lug in bushel baskets and appleboxes full of novels, from which he made his selection at seventy-five cents a copy. He later set to work to acquire everything listed in the Jacob Blanck bibliography, not realizing that here the competition of scores of much richer libraries and individuals would compel us to bid for every piece, and that at best one could never make a collection complete enough to be of any utility.

In the course of moving the books into the new stack in 1924, Brig noticed the size of our collection of American and early English periodicals, and began to build it. It was just in time, for when I tried to extend the collection twenty

years later, the material was simply not to be had. In 1929 the purchase of 344 Western county histories set him off on a course which eventually expanded the original collection, which was confined chiefly to the New England states, to what is apparently the largest single collection of books relating to all fifty states. This could never have been accomplished without the enthusiastic cooperation of antiquarian book dealers like Ernest Wessen, who was fired with the idea of such a collection. Incidentally, Mr. Wessen was also largely responsible for increasing our holdings of almanacs by twentyfold during the Brigham regime.

The thing which makes the book holdings of the American Antiquarian Society miraculous is that the funds at Brig's disposal were infinitesimal compared with those available to many other librarians.

Of course he could never have gone far without the ready assistance of a core of close personal friends who reached into their pockets when collections came on the market. Among these were Henry W. Cunningham, Clarence W. Bowen, James B. Wilbur, Samuel L. Munson, William Vail Kellen, Charles Henry Taylor, Matt B. Jones, and John H. Scheide, to mention only a few of those no longer with us. And one should point out that Clarence Brigham was himself one of the chief of this group of benefactors.

It was in a state of discouragement over the prospect of ever obtaining an adequate endowment for the Society that Brig resigned as librarian in 1930, citing the fact that he had trebled the size of the library in twenty-two years as proof that he needed rest. The Council assured the members, however, that he would "still be connected with the institution in an executive capacity as Director." As matters turned out, Brig felt it necessary to retain in his own hands all matters relating to policy and book purchase, while Mr. Vail, the new librarian, devoted himself to the completion

of Sabin and those other bibliographical projects which he did so well. Then came the depression, and the reduction of our income to the point at which book collecting became almost impossible. The one bright side of the situation was the availability of W.P.A. labor, which Brig turned to more useful and productive work than any other institutional head who ever came under my observation. In 1911 he had let our manuscript librarian go, with the explanation that there was no money with which to pay him; I suspect that the real reason was the man's refusal to follow instructions. Now, using W.P.A. manpower, Brig put our manuscript collections in order. As early as 1928 he had projected an index of death notices in certain newspapers which gave national coverage for this kind of material, and now using chiefly W.P.A. personnel, he completed this vast project. The great series of typewritten volumes has this year been commercially published by offset printing. With this Federal aid, he for the first time catalogued our now vast newspaper collection, and had our holdings recorded in the Gregory list.

In 1929 Brig had begun a much more complicated bibliographical project which could not utilize W.P.A. personnel; this was our imprint catalogue, which has now grown into the most important single bibliographical tool in this country outside of Washington. Also too complicated for W.P.A. personnel were the projects for the completion of Sabin and Evans, for which he obtained outside funds. Similarly he sponsored T. J. Holmes' Mather bibliography project.

The death of Waldo Lincoln and Calvin Coolidge in 1933 shook Brig badly and wrecked his hopes of obtaining an adequate endowment. The next year, reluctantly, he instituted the annual appeal to members, and with the proceeds restored book purchases to normal. His confidence thus revived, he projected a cumulative index of our *Proceedings* and *Transactions*, but although Frederick Weis made a

beginning on this work, it did not go far. The last great collection which Brig built up was that of Psalmody, which was based on the Bishop Robert W. Peach collection, which he purchased in 1940, and to which were later added the Wilbur Macy Stone and the Frank J. Metcalf collections. Faced with the problem of finding room for these, he finally ceased the effort to keep all United States government documents and all current institutional reports.

Brig's later years were largely concerned with the recording of his learning in print, to which he was spurred by a slight shock which he experienced in 1945. The newspaper bibliography was followed by his magnificent book on Paul Revere's engravings in 1955, and by his *Fifty Years of Collecting* in 1958.

Considering how much he achieved with the funds available to him, Clarence Brigham was certainly the greatest collector in his generation. His genius in selecting fields which were to become popular for collectors was amazing. No historian himself, he recognized fields of potential source material before most of the professionals, and was the first to collect them. I have often seen him in a state of exasperation at a visiting professor who had to have his nose rubbed in a kind of source material which he was determined to ignore because his predecessors had not used it.

Certainly no librarian in Brig's generation was a better and more willing guide and counselor to anyone engaged in research. I first saw him when in my first year as Sibley editor he walked up to my desk at the Massachusetts Historical Society and put down a great armload of unique newspapers which he had, unsolicited, brought from Worcester for my use. In other cities he obtained the cooperation of libraries for the Sibley work by himself checking my lists against their catalogues. He tried to talk to every non-genealogical researcher who came into this Library,

and there were times when the staff argued that he would do more to further scholarship by finishing his newspaper bibliography than by spending his time helping every Tom, Dick, and Harry who came along. It was typical of him that he had the editor of the *Dictionary of American Biography* inform all of its contributors that the American Antiquarian Society would be willing to try to answer any specific questions they might have.

To you who knew Brig personally, it is not necessary to describe his private life and character, his early fame as a tennis player, and his activity in many organizations. It is enough to say that his death brought many happily reminiscent letters from former visitors who remembered this Library for the help he had given them here.

During the past year Brig expressed only a mild interest in the project to air condition the Library because as a goal it had always seemed too remote to be worth our attention. It has been completed this month, thanks to the generosity of two of our members. For the first time in my memory the newspaper stacks have this summer been cool enough to work in, even though the system for cooling and dehumidifying the air had not been turned on. Simply circulating it and painting the roof white made a great difference. Now the air is cooled or warmed, its moisture content is controlled, and dust and chemicals are removed from it. Such complete air conditioning was not practical in the reading room and offices, but here the summer air is cooled.

In connection with this project there have been several unexpected dividends. For example, much of the original electric wiring of 1909 was still in use, with all sorts of piecemeal changes and tappings as particular needs had appeared. Now, for example, we shall be able to turn off the lights without turning off the water cooler and the water heater, and shall be able to use electric cleaning equipment without

causing fluctuations in current in the microfilming equipment.

The Council at its last meeting voted to comply with the recent request of the Alabama State Department of Archives and History that we turn over to them the Alabama Stone, given to us in 1823, and described in our *Proceedings* of October, 1888. The State sent a jet plane to pick up this relic which the Alabama newspapers described as their Plymouth Rock.

Fortunately there have been few changes in membership since the last meeting. Besides Clarence Brigham, we have lost only Claude M. Fuess, who died on September 11. Taking advantage of the increase in membership authorized last year, the Council is submitting a list of seven nominations, four of them being, you will notice, Worcester names. We have tried, over the years, to keep the proportion of close neighbors in the membership at fifteen per cent, but for various reasons the number has fallen to the point at which we can foresee a dangerous narrowing of that circle of friends without which the small professional staff of the Library would often be at their wits' end. Of necessity, committees have to be composed of members who live close at hand. This is the reason for the nominations which the Council is about to make.

For the Council,
CLIFFORD K. SHIPTON

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