

The Roger R. Trask Award and Fund was established by SHFG to honor the memory and distinguished career of the late SHFG president and longtime federal history pioneer and mentor Roger R. Trask. The award is presented to persons whose careers and achievements reflect a commitment to, and an understanding of, the unique importance of federal history work and SHFG's mission. John Y. Cole has had a distinguished 55-year career at the Library of Congress. He was the founding director of the Center for the Book and launched such programs as the first National Book Festival and the Library of Congress Literacy Awards program. He served as the Library's first official historian from 2016 to 2021, and has authored and edited numerous books and articles, most recently America's Greatest Library: An Illustrated History of the Library of Congress (2017).

Guardians of History at the Library of Congress

John Y. Cole

Thank you, Mark [Sweeney], for that generous introduction. It is an honor and a pleasure to deliver the Trask Lecture for the Society for History in the Federal Government. It is also a perfect opportunity to review how the Library of Congress has managed its own history—and to consider what the future might hold.

The Library of Congress—often described as a guardian of the nation's memory—has never had a permanent official historian or even its own history office. Yet over the course of its 224-year history, generations of “in-house” historians have served as guardians of the Library's memory. This group consists mostly of staff members, including myself, with contributions from outside subject specialists, consultants, and graduate students.



John Y. Cole

What I'm offering today is, in part, a tribute to all unofficial historians, past and present. While there have been gaps, given the part-time nature of our work, I think we've represented the institution pretty well.

But before I outline the work of these guardians, I'd first like to explore two unique and often overlooked aspects of the Library's history. The first is the early and

close statutory relationship between the Library and the nation's executive branch agencies, beginning with the Office of the President. The second is the Library's 1898 appropriations act, which gave the Librarian of Congress permanent authority to establish the institution's rules and regulations, thus enabling the Library to assume a greatly expanded new national role.

Today the Library's dual role as both a legislative and national entity makes it an unusual U.S. government agency. Because of its enormous size and the wide diversity of its collections, it is one of the world's largest and most significant research institutions. Moreover, many of its general services are free and available to the public—locally, nationally, and often internationally.

I also think it's worth noting that this complicated, multifaceted institution of more than 3,000 staff members has somehow captured its wide-ranging mission in a succinct 20 words: "to engage, inspire, and inform Congress and the American people with a universal and enduring source of knowledge and creativity."

President John Adams signed the act creating the Library of Congress in 1800. Only two years later, in 1802, Congress decided that the president of the United States—not Congress—would appoint the Librarian of Congress. Thus, this new government agency, definitely part of the legislative branch, would have a special relationship with the president and, as the bureaucracy grew, with executive branch agencies. It started with the presidency, however, and in addition to Adams, three other prominent U.S. presidents have played especially important roles in shaping the institution: Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Theodore Roosevelt. And it's no surprise that the papers of these four presidents, along with those of 19 others, are now available in the Library's Manuscript Division. The Library's special relationship with the executive branch re-emerged in 2001 when First Lady Laura Bush became a co-founder of the first Library of Congress National Book Festival.

In 1830 Congress granted Library borrowing privileges to the secretaries of state, treasury, war, navy, and the postmaster general, as well as to the secretary of the Senate, the clerk of the House of Representatives, and even former U.S. presidents when they were in the District of Columbia. Nor can we forget the Supreme Court. Congress granted the justices of the Court access to the Library in 1812, launching another continuing relationship across governmental lines. In 1936 the Library provided 25,000 duplicate volumes from its law library to help establish the library of the Supreme Court, a new Capitol Hill neighbor. And, no surprise, the papers of several of the most prominent justices are now in the Library's Manuscript Division.

A final example from the 19th century is particularly significant. After a disastrous fire on the Mall, in 1866 the Smithsonian Institution transferred its entire library to the Library of Congress, which had recently added two large rooms to its cramped quarters in the U.S. Capitol building. The 40,000-volume Smithsonian library was the foundation for the Library's science and foreign journal collections and for its worldwide international exchange program.

The second unique element of the Library's history, which I mentioned earlier, relates to the Joint Committee on the Library. The legislation creating the Library in 1800 also established the Joint Committee, the oldest continuing Joint Committee of the U.S. Congress. Its original purpose was to oversee the purchase of books, furnish a catalog, and "devise and establish" the Library's rules and regulations. In 1811, it became a standing committee "to be appointed each session of Congress"; one result was that the committee chair became responsible for the overall administration of the Library.

The committee's key job was to choose and acquire the Library's books; at the time, the Librarian of Congress had nothing to do with the book selection. The committee chair took the lead, usually joined by one or two committee members.

Prior to the Civil War, the Library was a modest endeavor with a small staff. Its collections of books, newspapers, and maps emphasized current topics of congressional interest, mostly law, politics, economics, geography, and history. Committee members generally agreed with its relatively narrow focus. In fact, in the 1820s and 1830s, committee chairs Congressman Edward Everett of Massachusetts and Senator William C. Preston of South Carolina failed to obtain approval to acquire valuable collections from abroad—as well as certain reference materials from American publishers.

Furthermore, the Library languished from 1846 until 1862, when Senator James A. Pearce from Maryland was Library Committee chairman. A conservative, domineering chairman with Southern sympathies, Pearce viewed the Library of Congress as little more than a limited-service gentleman's club. However, his rather obscure death in 1862 is, for me at least, a turning point in the Library's history. Pearce's death gave my eventual Library hero, the new assistant librarian Ainsworth Rand Spofford, his first opportunities to begin transforming the institution.

When Spofford became assistant librarian in 1861, the Librarian of Congress, a political appointee, quickly left him in charge of the seven-person Library, then

crowded into the unfinished U.S. Capitol. During the next two years, Spofford, a former Cincinnati journalist, editorial writer, and literary entrepreneur came to a surprising conclusion: his tiny, relatively unknown library was in fact an unrecognized national institution. He described the situation succinctly in an article he published in 1864, stating: “The United States will never possess a public library which can fitly be called national until Congress shall take a more liberal view of the value and importance of such a collection.”¹

The next year, when the position of Librarian of Congress suddenly became available, Spofford sought the post himself. Badly needing political support, he turned directly to the members of Congress he was serving and soon forwarded endorsements from no less than 22 senators and 87 members of the House of Representatives. That did the job, for on the last day of 1864, President Abraham Lincoln appointed 39-year-old Ainsworth Rand Spofford to be the sixth Librarian of Congress. Spofford was to serve energetically and influentially as Librarian of Congress from 1864 to 1897; his principal achievement during those years was nothing less than establishing the dual legislative and national nature of the government institution he headed.

I have studied Spofford for years, but I am still learning and am still in awe. Among his many accomplishments, two were of central importance. First came the centralization of all U.S. copyright activities at the Library in 1870, a task helped along by his Ohio friend Congressman Rutherford B. Hayes, who also happened to be a member of the Joint Library Committee. His second major achievement was to persuade Congress, starting in 1871, of the need for a separate building for its new national library. The monumental structure now known as the Jefferson Building opened to an admiring public 26 years later on November 1, 1897.

In late 1896, with the construction of the building virtually completed, the Joint Committee held four days of public hearings about the Library and its future. Spofford and officials from the American Library Association were the key witnesses. The result, outlined in the 1898 annual appropriation, effective on July 1, 1897, included major appropriation increases, a large boost in the staff from 42 to 108, and an administrative reorganization that reflected the national role that Spofford envisioned.

¹ “The Public Libraries of the United States,” in *National Almanac and Annual Record for the Year 1864* (Philadelphia: George W. Childs, 1864), 2:59.

During his 32 years as Librarian, Ainsworth Spofford effectively co-opted the Joint Library Committee, enlisting its members to support his national library cause. Primarily for this reason, the House Appropriations Committee transferred the responsibility for making the Library's rules and regulations from the Joint Library Committee to a newly empowered Office of the Librarian of Congress—an authority Spofford had successfully assumed without asking. The Joint Library Committee assumed a new advisory role, and the Librarian of Congress was given new legal authority and the independence to shape the institution in the best way that he or she saw fit—subject to congressional approval, of course. Congress itself, however, also was given a new role: for the first time the president's nomination of a Librarian would need Senate approval.

By prearrangement, the 72-year-old Spofford stepped down as Librarian of Congress on July 1, 1897. To the institution's benefit, he did not leave, serving as the chief assistant librarian until his death in 1908. Obviously, he had been too busy making the Library's history to worry about recording it; that was to be left to his principal successor: Herbert Putnam.

Putnam, the former director of the Boston Public Library, served as Librarian of Congress for a record-breaking 40 years, from 1899 to 1939. The first professional librarian to head the institution, he was the candidate recommended by the relatively new American Library Association, and President McKinley agreed. Putnam greatly expanded Spofford's accomplishments, particularly its services to the nation's libraries. The staff expanded from just over 100 in 1899 to more than 1,000 when he retired in 1939. Like Spofford, Putnam was fearless in promoting the Library's national role. Two of the presidents he convinced were Theodore Roosevelt—who praised Putnam's national library plans in his first State of the Union address in 1901—and Warren G. Harding—who in 1921 approved Putnam's scheme to transfer the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution from the State Department to the Library for permanent possession and display.

Putnam, an outsider, was well aware of the Library's historical role. In 1899, for his new Bibliography Division, he hired William Dawson Johnston, a former history teacher at Brown University. One of Johnston's assignments was to edit a new series of books on American library history; the hefty first volume, *History of the Library of Congress, Volume I, 1800–1864*, was published in 1904. Unfortunately, Johnston left the Library in 1907, and there never was a second volume. It also was unfortunate that his single volume—largely a valuable collection of important documents from the Library's early history—ended in the year 1864, just before

the eventful Spofford era started. Nevertheless, William Dawson Johnston had in effect become the library's first staff in-house historian.

He was followed in this capacity by another early Putnam administrative appointee, Frederick William Ashley, who eventually served as chief assistant librarian from 1927 to 1936. Ashley wrote an excellent historical summary in a 1929 volume honoring Putnam; however, the manuscript of his unfinished history of the institution lies quietly among his papers in the Manuscript Division. In fact, it's not far from the unfinished manuscript of the planned second volume of the Library's history that William Dawson Johnston left behind when he departed in 1907.

In 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt named a successor to Putnam: writer and poet Archibald MacLeish, Roosevelt's ally and part-time speech writer. In his Senate confirmation hearings, MacLeish easily overcame opposition from the American Library Association, which wanted another professional librarian. Relishing the Library as both a "people's house" and a symbol of democracy, MacLeish became an effective and inspiring Librarian of Congress and an eloquent spokesman on behalf of libraries and librarians as the United States entered World War II.

In 1942 Lucy Salamanca, a well-known magazine writer and also a Library staff member, published an informative but lightly documented general history of the Library aptly titled *Fortress of Freedom*. In his brief foreword, Librarian MacLeish notes that since "no history of the Library of Congress has been written," it was "exceptionally fitting" that Salamanca's story of the Library "should come to the attention of the American people at this time."

The Library's next, and perhaps best-known, in-house historian, David C. Mearns, first started working at the Library in 1918, directly under Putnam. I first met Mearns in 1969, three years after I joined the Library's staff. By then I had fallen in love with the Library's history, enrolled in an American Studies Ph.D. program at the George Washington University, and was shopping for a dissertation topic. Mearns had recently retired as chief of the Manuscript Division after a distinguished 49-year career as an administrator, writer, and unofficial Library of Congress historian. His informal history of the Library, *The Story Up to Now*, published in 1947, was a classic account but one with a slant: to show Congress that the Library indeed had national roots. He introduced me to Spofford as a key but still relatively unknown Librarian of Congress and suggested him as my topic. I happily agreed, secured his support as an informal advisor and began a

friendship with David Mearns that lasted until he passed away in 1981. Along the way he presented me with a prized possession: a heavily used but still legible calling card from Ainsworth Spofford dated 1893, which of course I immediately framed!

In addition to books on the Library's history, major anniversary years increasingly provided an opportunity to commemorate the Library's past. The Library of Congress marked its 150th anniversary in 1950. By today's standards the celebration was a bit on the meager side, but for historians it was notable on several counts. Herbert Putnam, who was to pass away the next year at the age of 91, was present and gave a memorable talk, concluding with a tribute to none other than Ainsworth Rand Spofford. Throughout the entire year, the intermissions of the radio broadcasts of the Library's evening concerts featured Mearns, Librarian of Congress Luther H. Evans, and assistant librarian Verner Clapp in a series of discussions about the Library's collections, programs, and history. And finally, David Mearns contributed a lively introduction to a slim, attractive catalog of a small historical exhibition in honor of the anniversary. The first page is a letter from President Harry S. Truman to Librarian Evans invoking "the spirit of Thomas Jefferson" in "congratulating the American people upon their Library's sesquicentennial."

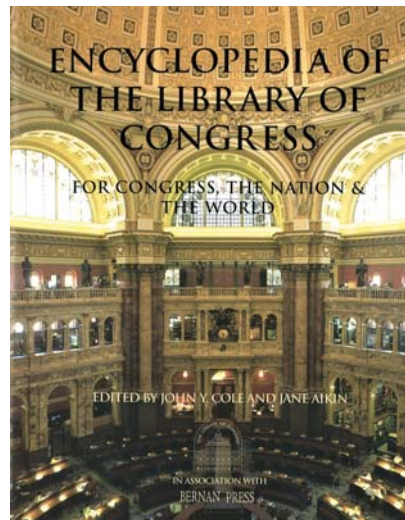
Prior to the Library's 175th anniversary in 1975, my LC "history fingers" started to twitch. I had started a biographical essay about Spofford for an anniversary issue of the Library's *Quarterly Journal*. I then suggested to the head of the Library's Publishing Office that similar, newly researched biographical essays about the 10 other Librarians of Congress be commissioned for publication during the anniversary year, or shortly thereafter. She said fine—if I would help her recruit appropriate authors who could meet the needed deadlines. I agreed and was pleased that, indeed, we were able to make it happen. A compilation of the articles in book form with the not-so-creative title *Librarians of Congress, 1802–1974*, was published in 1977.

My first book, *For Congress and the Nation: A Chronological History of the Library of Congress* was published in 1979, but I was just getting started. The leading Library staff in-house historian in the 1970s and early 1980s was Charles Goodrum, one of the directors of the Legislative Reference Service. A talented writer and mystery novelist, Goodrum crafted two different popular histories of the Library that sold well commercially and were later reprinted. The first was a 1974 volume published by Praeger and reprinted in 1982. Larger and more

ambitious was a color-plated coffee-table volume titled *Treasures of the Library of Congress*, published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., in 1980. A revised and expanded version appeared in 1991. When Chuck Goodrum asked me to prepare reading lists for both of his titles, I was flattered.

The anniversary celebration of the Library's bicentennial on April 24, 2000, was a lively year-long affair. Historian James H. Billington had been appointed Librarian of Congress in 1987 by President Ronald Reagan. I began pestering Dr. Billington about the forthcoming anniversary soon after he was appointed and thus was not surprised when he appointed me, along with his chief of staff, as co-chairs of the bicentennial steering committee. Our year-long theme was "Libraries, Creativity, Liberty." Throughout the year, Dr. Billington's energy and fundraising talents were evident through a wide range of celebratory national events such as Local Legacies, Living Legends, and Gifts to the Nation. The Library also provided research help and space for writer James Conaway to prepare his elegant popular history, *America's Library: The Story of the Library of Congress, 1800–2000*, published by Yale University Press in association with the Library.

Back in the 1980s, I started a series of informal, staff-oriented discussions about the Library's history. Guests were welcome, and one was Jane Aikin, a graduate student at the University of Michigan who was searching for a dissertation topic. Her work eventually centered on the crucial years of the Library's development from 1896 until 1939. A few years later, the University of Illinois Press published her excellent book *The Nation's Great Library: Herbert Putnam and the Library of Congress, 1899–1939*. She and I became colleagues, and I persuaded her to join me as the co-editor of a new, major compilation tentatively titled "The Encyclopedia of the Library of Congress." In the end, this part-time project almost became overwhelming, taking nine years to complete before its publication in 2004 by the Library in association with Bernan Press under the title *Encyclopedia of the Library of Congress: For Congress, the Nation, & the World*.



The *Encyclopedia* (2004) contains contributions from over 40 Library employees that include alphabetical entries, essays, and appendices on Library history, collections, and notable people.

A one-volume, 567-page reference work with more than 200 illustrations, the *Encyclopedia* included newly written essays by more than 40 Library subject specialists who wrote brief histories of their respective administrative divisions and the diverse collections in their custody. Appendices included historical lists of senior Library officials, legislative appropriations, collection growth, major gifts and endowments, and chairmen of the Joint Committee on the Library.

Fortunately, Jane's interest in the history of the Library blossomed as never before after 2016, when she retired from her position as director of research programs after a successful 30-year career at the National Endowment for the Humanities. Drawing on and expanding her past work and detailed knowledge, she decided to undertake a brand new one-volume history of the Library through the Billington administration, which ended in 2015. Her readable and scholarly volume, detailed footnotes and all, is being published by Georgetown University Press in association with the Library. And I'm pleased to note that Jane is in attendance with us today.

In 2016 David Mao, the acting Librarian of Congress, took the important step of appointing, for the first time in Library history, an official historian: me. I served in the post for a fairly short interval before retiring from the Library in 2021 after 55 years of service. I look back on my five years as historian with some pride for what I accomplished and some regret for the work that remains.

One of my most significant accomplishments was the expansion and updating of my 1979 chronology, which was published in 2018 as *America's Greatest Library: An Illustrated History of the Library of Congress*. The book was very well received, was recently reprinted, and is one of the top-selling titles in the LC Shop.

I also worked with the Library's Office of Communications to develop a timeline of LC history for the website and also made some long-overdue updates. I welcomed new Library employees with a brief history of the Library during their first-day orientation. I engaged a librarian participating in the Library's Leadership Development Program to research and document the Library's history needs, thus beginning the process of making the case for establishing a permanent history office with modest resources and dedicated support. I stayed in close contact with Cheryl Fox in the Manuscript Division, supporting her work with the all-important Library of Congress archives. And I continued to review primary source documents and compile research on the history of the Center for the Book and the emergence and growth of the Library's public-facing initiatives during the Billington administration.

It would have been all too easy for the Office of the Historian to fade away after my retirement. But we are incredibly fortunate to have a powerful advocate for federal history in the Principal Deputy Librarian of Congress, Mark Sweeney. Mark is committed to the re-establishment of a permanent historian position within the Publishing Office. In the interim, he has made funding available for two major engagements with the Library's Federal Research Division that will guide the Library's strategy on staffing and oral history.

Thank you, Mark.

And our efforts have been significantly bolstered by the leaders of this Society, which has provided invaluable guidance and support. To all of you who serve as guardians of history, thank you.

I have never been more optimistic about the future of history at the Library of Congress. The story of this great institution will continue to be recorded, preserved, and shared for years to come, and there is no doubt that history's lessons will continue to benefit the Library's leaders and the American people.

Thank you.

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