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John Langdon Sibley, librarian

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Accessibility

John Langdon Sibley, Librarian

Because of that jade Clio's preference for entertaining, gossipy tales, John Langdon Sibley has been remembered chiefly as the antiquated and absurd figure he cut in the stories which members of the Eliot administration told about him. In reality he was one of the wisest and ablest librarians of his time, and it is a blessing to the entire world of scholarship that it was he who was in charge of the Harvard Library during its swift development into an institution of world-wide importance. In his full personal diary, his many bound volumes of library correspondence, and his annual reports, he has left a detailed record of the development of library policy which is interesting, and amusing, to all good librarians who today struggle with similar problems.[1]

Sibley was born in the year 1804 in the town of Union in the District of Maine, and was fitted for college at Exeter. He came to Cambridge to enter the Freshman class in the fall of 1821. During the next spring vacation he began working in the College Library, the only employee besides the Librarian, Joseph Green Cogswell, and his successor, Charles Folsom. Chiefly by this means he worked his way through college. A few days after his graduation in 1825 he was crossing the bridge into Boston when overtaken by a chaise driven by President Kirkland, who nearly frightened him into the river by pulling up and addressing him as 'Mr Sibley.' It was the first time that John had ever been addressed by the title, but, as he observed, old customs were passing. One of these was that the librarian's assistant should be an undergraduate. Kirkland told him that it was proposed to appoint a full-time assistant librarian at a salary of $150 a year, and offered him the place.

This was a golden opportunity which Sibley eagerly grasped. He had his room free, and as his only duty in the Library was to obtain books for readers, he had plenty of time in regular hours to do copying, which brought him in as much again as his salary. When Folsom left in 1826, Sibley was acting Librarian for a month; but then his job as

[1] Besides these sources this sketch relies chiefly on the minutes of the Library Council, the Corporation, and the Overseers, and on certain reports made to the Overseers. All these sources are preserved in the Harvard University Archives.

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assistant was abolished in order to provide a more adequate salary for the new Librarian, Benjamin Peirce. There being nowhere else in America any prospect of a career as a professional librarian, Sibley turned rather unwillingly to the Unitarian ministry, at which he was not a conspicuous success. Nor in four years spent as editor of the *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge* did he attract much attention.

Sibley happened to be in Cambridge and at leisure in March, 1841, when the University faced the problem of removal of the Library from Harvard Hall to the new building, Gore. Employed temporarily as an assistant, he managed so well that it took only eleven days to make the change, and during that period every book was accessible by means of a marked copy of the printed catalogue. The fact that the new building was a long, high, narrow hall in which pillars effectively shut off vision from any one point made a second full-time employee a necessity. So Sibley was appointed Assistant Librarian and launched a second time on his life work.

With a new building and two full-time employees, the Harvard Library quickly began to improve its service. In the old library in Harvard Hall there had been an effort since 1765 to keep up an open-shelf collection for undergraduate use, but borrowers who wanted books from the alcoves had to put in a call-slip one day and return the next to obtain the volume — or to find that it was out. In Gore, Sibley provided reasonably fast service for alcove books. The main hall, or 'Librarian's Room,' provided space for an open-shelf collection of three thousand volumes, which at first seems to have satisfied all usual undergraduate need. But with the improvement of methods of instruction in the forties and fifties, more and more undergraduates began to ask for alcove volumes for research and supplementary reading, making the question of reader access to the rest of the Library a subject of warm debate. In general, any student who wanted other books than those on the open shelves was admitted to the locked alcoves, where he could sit at a table and help himself to the books around him; but this was a matter of special privilege and not of right. In the fifties, both undergraduates and Faculty began to complain that the books in the open-shelf collection, having been selected by the college officers many years before, were out of date, and that alcove access, hours, and borrowing rules were inadequate. Sibley answered some of these criticisms by weeding the open-shelf collection and keeping special shelves for

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latest and most popular books. By changing these seasonally with the courses he increased the number of volumes readily available to undergraduates, and prevented the charging-out of books needed for course work. In addition he instituted the practice of overnight charging-out at closing time.

These changes, made by Sibley without much more than the indifferent consent of the Librarian, Thaddeus William Harris, did not still the demands of the Faculty for longer library hours and freer access to the shelves for themselves and the students. Particularly troublesome was the growing habit of the students, and even of the Faculty, of remaining in Cambridge during the long winter and summer vacations and expecting to have access to the Library. Although Sibley willingly put in much voluntary overtime, he and Harris expected the long vacations which academic men had enjoyed since universities began. In term time Sibley's hours for some years were from 9 until sunset or 4, whichever came earlier, with Friday afternoons and Saturdays off. In 1847 the Corporation enraged him by voting, at the behest of his Faculty critics, that his hours in term time be from 8 to evening prayers, with the dinner hour and Saturday afternoon off. During vacations he was to work Monday mornings. If he worked overtime, he was to be paid for it. Bitterly he protested the eight-hour day for librarians: 'Is there any man, whose constitution, with such confinement, would not in time be seriously injured if not ruined?' As for having to work Monday mornings during vacations: 'Is it not a hard life, when a man in vacation is deprived of a great part of the relaxation and opportunities for journeying, which the stringency of the requirements for term time renders the more necessary. . . . The exactions made by these votes he considers oppressive. His time has not been spent in reading, or frittered away, but consciencіously devoted to labor.' It was not that Sibley was lazy, or even set upon having the traditional academic freedom of time, but that he resented being ordered to stay in Gore Hall waiting on undergraduates when he might have been traveling around gathering books for the Library. The Corporation heard his protest and recognized its point by voting that he should have half of each vacation period entirely free.

When Harris died in 1856 certain members of the Faculty, who were entirely mistaken as to the quality of the service rendered by the Harvard Library in earlier years, and by European libraries in their own generation, were pressing for further privileges of access which

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could not possibly be granted by such an institution with such a staff. When Faculty members broke library rules, Sibley applied the sanctions with such gusto that there were a number who were determined that a new and more amenable man should be brought in as Librarian. There were many applications for the job, but a number of prominent people wrote in on behalf of Sibley. According to him, Louis Agassiz, determined 'to get a scientific control over everything,' tried to influence the situation by starting the rumor that the one man whom the Corporation would not accept was Sibley. The latter, however, convinced President Walker that the purpose of the Faculty critics was to get a Librarian under whom they could 'set aside the laws pertaining to the government of the Library.'

Sibley's friends won out, and on 18 February 1856 he was unanimously chosen Librarian by the Corporation, and given a salary of $1,300. Ezra Abbot was appointed Assistant Librarian. The Overseers approved Sibley's appointment by a vote of fifteen to two. Now, after years of chafing at the elbow of a Librarian who was content with old-fashioned library ways, he was free to put into effect his own ideas. He was the first Harvard Librarian to realize that the University drew its nourishment from the Library, which in turn must grow in order to supply that sustenance. Some of his ideas were simply too advanced for his generation. Among these was a proposal which he made to the Corporation in 1847 to appoint a 'Builder up of the Library,' or 'Library Professor,' or 'Professor of Bibliography,' who would lecture on libraries, and on the contents of Gore in particular, in order to breed up in the student body future book lovers, book collectors, and library donors. This new appointee should familiarize himself with the Harvard collections so that he could intelligently correspond with authors and collectors, and attract donations from them. He should also handle the book orders to guard against the purchase of duplicates; should complete imperfect series, exchange duplicates, attend auctions, read catalogues, and travel in order to search bookstores and garrets. This proposal is the best summary of the important things which his predecessors had not done, but to which, during the next two decades, he devoted every moment which he could squeeze from the traditional routine of the Library. For this larger outline of the functions of the University Library and the work of its Librarian, he was indebted only to his own comprehension of the problem. For many of the details of the essential improvement in library machinery, he drew on the ideas

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of such friends and acquaintances as Jewett of the Boston Public and Dewey of Amherst. His conversations and correspondence with them are reflected in his decisions that public catalogues should be as simple as possible, that call-numbers should denote subjects rather than shelves, and the like.

Neither the details of the librarian's craft, nor the theories as to his function, interested Sibley as much as books themselves; and it was in the gathering of them that his greatest contribution lay. During his first term as Assistant Librarian, the accessions of the Harvard Library amounted to twenty-five or thirty volumes a year, of which he himself gave about half. When he returned in 1841, he found accessions increased about tenfold, but still, to him, absurdly small. Harris watched with indifference the increased flow which resulted from the efforts of the Assistant Librarian, and complained that the government documents which he was bringing in only 'lumbered up the Library.' After a verbal clash on this subject, Sibley reviewed his argument in his private diary:

> Are we to say to the public we do not want your books unless they are such as *we* think are very excellent? Because we are afraid we shall fill the shelves too full, when we have in Gore Hall, one hundred and forty feet long from window to window, but about 50,000 bound volumes? Let the library be filled. If trash comes let it come. What is trash to me may be the part of the Library which will be the most valuable to another person. Numbers give consequence to a library abroad.

Ignoring the position of Harris' eyebrows, Sibley during his tenure as Assistant Librarian dunned all and sundry so well that he brought into the Library by donation, he reckoned, 7,000 volumes and between 15,000 and 20,000 pamphlets.

When Sibley became Librarian the funds available for book purchase amounted to three or four hundred dollars a year, not enough to buy even the books which the professors requested. As the energetic editor of the Triennial Catalogue for many years, and as Commencement Marshal and the leader of the singing of the Seventy-eighth Psalm on that occasion, he was well known to the alumni body, a fact which he proposed to utilize. At the first Commencement after his elevation to the librarianship, each graduate sitting down to the dinner in Harvard Hall found at his plate a circular asking his personal assistance in obtaining for the Library a copy of every book, map, or pamphlet written or published in the United States, or pertaining to America. The collec-

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tion in Gore Hall should be made, he declared, a 'National library.' The plea had immediate effect. The Alumni Association formed a library committee, and the Harvard Club of New York gladly afforded him the opportunity of meeting and influencing the great book collectors of that city.

The most unexpected result of the Commencement circular of 1856 was the gift of nearly a hundred volumes from Ticknor and Fields. That firm instituted the policy of giving Harvard a copy of each of its publications, and a few years later Oliver Ditson & Co. adopted the same policy for its musical publications. Macmillan & Co. was equally generous, if not as regular in its giving. But Sibley kept his eye on the small donor as well, and popularized the idea that every graduate should give the Library at least one book a year. Soon, he estimated, one in every fifteen living graduates was contributing. He made a practice of inviting the Senior class to Gore Hall, where he exhibited interesting books and manuscripts and in this connection installed, in 1860, the first exhibition cases. The undergraduates became interested; the *Advocate* gave $200, and other student organizations, lesser sums. Further enthusiasm to give was engendered by Sibley's introduction of the practice of listing donations in his annual reports, which were usually printed at length in the Boston newspapers and which obviously interested both the Harvard community and the public. Before his appointment as Assistant Librarian donations were running to about 160 volumes a year; in 1864 they numbered 2,000. By 1868 the donors had become so numerous that the list of them had to be relegated to an appendix in the report. In these lists, incidentally, Sibley chastely segregated the names of 'female donors.'

The new Librarian's field of interest extended beyond the usual printed books to contemporary ephemera in every form. He urged men interested in special fields, such as the war in Texas, to make it their duty to build up the Harvard collection of printed material relating to them. Brigham Young yielded to his importunings and sent a collection of Mormon books. Harvard men marched to the Civil War carrying his instructions for collecting. Even the facsimile Confederate scrip he thought to be worthy of special attention. But for plunder he had no use. By means of his annual report of 1863 he addressed his collectors:

Personal communications speak of plates torn out of books by vulgar or besotted Soldiers, volumes trodden under foot, magnificent works torn to frag-

ments, and collections tossed about in sport, burnt or carried off piecemeal by officers as well as soldiers. In the seceding States this Vandalism ought to have been prevented, and in many cases would have been, if the Federal officers had done their duty. A very few of these volumes have found their way into Gore Hall. I am glad they are here. They were rescued from immediate destruction by persons who felt that they should be saved. I regard them as deposits to be sacredly kept, and shall gladly, if possible, restore them hereafter to the former possessors.

He showed no such resentment at the liberation of the human property of the South, but in his determination to disprove the calumny 'that colored people are incapable of high intellectual cultivation' he conducted a 'Books for Liberia' campaign. After the war he made an effort to enlist the aid of the ex-Confederates in the student body to collect Rebel material for the Harvard Library.

Nothing in the Civil War pained Sibley more than the sight of piles and cartloads of books and pamphlets on the way to the paper mills, drawn by the prices offered for waste. 'The havoc is terrible; of many books and pamphlets not a single copy will be left.' To forestall it he spent long hours with cloak and lantern in wet cellars which yielded treasures for the Library. Once he heard of a large pile of Baltimore newspapers lying on the sidewalk in Water Street in Boston and dashed over to save them, only to find that they were on their way to the Boston Athenaeum rather than the paper mill.

Usually Sibley was without competition in his search for newspapers; and, indeed, no successor of his in the Harvard Library has felt that he could continue the space-consuming policy of gathering such material. However, no one has regretted the fact that Sibley made a point of collecting early California newspapers and regularly subscribed for a dozen others during the Civil War. Other files came in from the libraries of the Harvard Clubs. Directories, city documents, and schoolbooks were other materials which he industriously gathered and defended against the protests of Faculty members who regarded them as so much junk. But where else, he asked the examining committee of 1858, will 'some American Hallam or Sismondi' find 'the schoolbooks of the last and present centuries to obtain a general idea of their character and of the early education of the country?'

To Sibley it was the most sacred duty of the librarian to preserve a copy of every printed item for the use of posterity. No one else in his generation did more to spread the idea of the importance of ephemeral

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material for history. To the newspaper printings of his report for the year 1861 he added this paragraph, typical of his campaign:

> One of the greatest favors to the future historian would be to collect all the books, pamphlets, maps, files of newspapers, engravings, photographs, caricatures, ephemeral publications of every kind, even to printed notices, circulars, handbills, posters, letter envelopes, and place them beyond the reach of destruction. . . . If I could, I would appeal to every inhabitant of the continent to send me everything which could be obtained, in order that every phase of mind in every section of the country, North, South, East, West, for the Union and against the Union, for secession and against secession, might be represented.

With members of the Faculty taking a cynical view as to the value of preserving even pamphlet material, Sibley had to become really eloquent to convince Examining Committees that the whole of the printed word was the scope which the Harvard Library should try to cover in order to fill its proper function. Although he talked most frequently of American material, he welcomed the great expansion of the foreign collections which occurred in the fifties, particularly after the Henry Ware Wales gift of 1,500 volumes largely in Sanskrit, Hebrew, Turkish, Arabic, and Persian. In 1865 he bought the musical library of Levi Parsons. Nor were his interests confined to printed material, for he rejoiced to obtain a Latin manuscript which he believed to date from the eighth century and to be the oldest in the country; and he welcomed such special collections as the photographs of members of Harvard classes, and urged every alumnus to send in his own photograph.

The result of Sibley's ideas and labors can be read in the accession figures of the Library. In his first year as Librarian, accessions hit a new peak of 3,906 volumes and 2,498 pamphlets. Within three years the figure for volumes was doubled again, although it later leveled off at around 5,000 a year. In spite of his willingness to accept junk, this was no mere crow's nest accumulation; in 1876 he began to issue a library bulletin, the ancestor of this present publication, in order to call attention to interesting and important accessions. When he became Librarian he found about 100,000 volumes in the several libraries of the University. On the eve of his retirement this figure had grown to 230,000, of which some 164,000 were in Gore Hall. The bulk of the Library's holdings had increased about fourfold. The figures are deceptive, for the 'library count' did not cover unbound pamphlets, maps, and the like, which in a moment of excessive enthusiasm for this kind

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of material he estimated to exceed in bulk the bound volumes which were formally counted.

When Sibley took over in 1856 one of his first steps was to provide shelving for the books which were already stacked on the floor and stored in out-of-the-way places, but this did not deter his campaign to obtain 'any and everything' in print. By 1863 he had come to the conclusion that the Library would double every twenty years, but he never really faced the arithmetical consequences of this fact, for he estimated that a century hence the Library would contain only 750,000 volumes, and in his later reports he even reduced that figure to half a million. Since he would never contemplate serious weeding, one can only conclude that his subconscious mind was taking this means of solving the space problem for him. Had his successors maintained his policy of collection, the Library would by now dwarf the rest of the University.

When Gore Hall was built it was assumed that it would provide ample room for growth for a century, but within twenty years it was crowded. President Quincy refused to permit the sale or exchange of duplicates, but after his retirement Sibley gained some space in this manner. When he became Librarian he nearly doubled the capacity of Gore by the use of movable shelves, some of which were installed so as to divide each alcove in two. President Walker and the architect complained bitterly that his new shelving destroyed the beauty of the building, but he silenced them with the question, 'For what was the library built — for books or for looks?' Sibley did not defend the division of the alcoves on any other grounds than of the most painful necessity, for he was the one who suffered most by it. The architects of Gore Hall had made no provision for offices or work space. Sibley himself had no room of any kind in the Library into which he could retire for private conversation, or in which he could leave his papers spread out free from the risk of having some undergraduate pick them up and start reading. Indeed he had no more privacy, he said, than he would have had in a barroom. The only working space for the staff was on the tables in the main reading room, or in the alcoves; but now that the latter were divided, when there was a call for a book in one of them the staff member working there often had to come out and bring his chair with him to make room for the ladder. By 1868 Sibley was piling books on the floor in front of the showcases, and by the end of

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his administration he was piling them on the floor in front of the alcoves in which they belonged.

To combat this space problem Sibley tried all kinds of shifts. In 1862 he gained a hundred shelves by shelving by size, a laborious process because it involved the changing of all of the shelfmarks in the books. Three years later he began to double-row the books on the shelves. The Overseers proposed weeding the Library, but found the Librarian prepared to die on this particular barricade. President Eliot was a strong advocate of the storage of little-used books, but Sibley held him off and reported with glee his experience when the enlargement of 1877 compelled the sending of some 20,000 volumes temporarily to Boylston Hall, a few yards away. These volumes were selected, he said, because they were 'considered so worthless as to be fit only to be ground up, since no person could possibly want them for any purpose whatever'; yet he found himself obliged to send to Boylston for volumes from five to twenty times a day. Although he would never admit it publicly, the problem of space finally shook his creed of universal collection. In his diary for 29 March 1874 he wrote:

What is to be done with books? Till the beginning of the present century, and even later, it was not inexpedient for public libraries . . . to gather in copies of every book or pamphlet that could be got. Now, the facilities for printing, the passion for reading, which in America was greatly quickened in the late war . . . with various other causes, will make it necessary, both to use books to advantage and to facilitate investigations, and to keep library buildings within reasonable and convenient limits as to size and attendants, to adopt, quite generally, a system of libraries for specialities or particular subjects.

Although there were practically no funds earmarked for library use when Sibley's services began, he never found it difficult to obtain the money he needed for book purchases. As soon as he became Librarian, he began to urge that some individual obtain immortality for himself by endowing a book purchase fund. For a decade he campaigned for $150,000, or better $500,000, which would, he said, so overshadow all other gifts that by the judicious use of bookplates it could make the donor's name synonymous with the institution, which with such a wealth of research material would draw students from the entire world! This letter, addressed to A. A. Lawrence, was typical of his fund campaign:

The leading men of the Revolution, the Otises, the Adamses, Hancock, Quincy, and others, caught the spirit of liberty and patriotism from the education and

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books at Old Harvard; and how many of the valiant defenders of our country in the field and in her councils during the recent Rebellion were moved by the consideration of subjects to which their attention was called and which they looked into among the tomes in Gore Hall! Shall the Library which sends out such influences be chilled for want of funds? God forbid! Give us the money and we will give you back the power of doing good to the whole world.

This particular plea had no results, but from various sources the funds available for book purchase grew during his regime from $250 a year to the yield of an investment of $170,000.

Another problem which the Sibley administration met with success was that of staff. When Ezra Abbot was appointed Assistant Librarian the Librarian was informed that the new appointee was specifically given entire charge of classification and cataloguing. Sibley did not resent having the Assistant Librarian autonomous as much as he resented the fact that Abbot, who later became Bussey Professor of New Testament Criticism and Interpretation, tended to side with the Faculty in its disputes with the Library. Abbot's successor, John Fiske, played curiously little part in library affairs.

The energy with which Sibley attacked his job when freed from the incubus of Harris brought an increase of mail amounting in 1858 to a thousand letters, and compelled him to add a third member to the library staff, a clerk. But that year is more momentous in the history of American libraries for the fact that in it Sibley 'for the first time employed females to clean small books.' These employees were, of course, in the tradition of that ancient institution, the college goody; but on 11 April 1859 Woman really got her nose into the tent, and the retreat of the male librarian commenced: 'Began to employ female help in the Library. Miss Caroline Louisa and Miss Ellen Maria, daughters of the late Samuel Sawyer, M.D., of Cambridge (Class of 1827) began copying lists of books to be bought, which have been brought in by Professors. Compensation six cents per hour for the present.' Sibley tapped this source of library help at a moment when his activity piled up a mountain of work which could not have been cleared away had it been necessary to pay male wages. The girls wrote a beautiful hand which is blessed by everyone who has to read through the earlier records in Sibley's miserable scrawl. The advantages of the beautiful hand were so obvious that after two months the girls were put to work assisting Abbot on the catalogue. That same month a daughter of

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James Winthrop Harris was engaged to help read the alcove shelves, and the next year her sister was brought in.

Almost immediately Sibley encountered the other perennial problem concerned with the employment of women — girls will be girls and get married. When the supply of daughters of deceased Harvard graduates ran out, he turned to that ever flowing spring, the Cambridge High School, and engaged the first scholar in the graduating class. In six years the staff of the Library had increased from two to eleven: 'Thus we now have employed in the Library, five young ladies, besides the Librarian, Assistant Librarian, Mr. Cutter the 2d Assistant Librarian & T. J. Kiernan, the Janitor; and John Maccarty a boy, and J. W. Harris when not employed as Presidents Clerk.' It had been Sibley's custom to control the entrance to Gore Hall by hiding the key in a niche by the door, but in 1867 he gave up this practice so that the girls might come and go as they wished. In 1873 he appointed Annie E. Hutchins 'head of female assistants' with a salary of $700. This was, however, not an entire solution, as this entry from his diary suggests:

> Chiding one of the Library assistants for attempting to tyrannize over the others whom she was directed to instruct in cataloging. . . . Stormy time in the Library about my finding fault with one of the girls. I told them all were equal and that all should behave and all should be treated as ladies.

In spite of such troubles the girls were such an obvious success that President Eliot, Sibley complained, tried 'to get away library female assistants to help the College Treasurer.'

Those were the days in which boys were glad to come to work in the Library on trial without pay, and when proved were glad to take $1.50 a week. However, the lads under twelve may not have been worth much more. Sibley first tapped another great source of faithful library help when on 5 December 1859 he hired 'John Maccarty, an Irish lad, not thirteen years old . . . for one dollar a week, on trial.' When John grew older he left the Library and learned the bookbinder's trade, but remained within Sibley's ken. In 1856 the Library had 246 volumes bound and 42 repaired, but the flood of accessions which resulted from the new Librarian's efforts quickly changed that statistic. Sibley himself checked shipments for the bindery and after their return, sending back all defective pieces with specific complaints. With octavos in half sheep costing as much as 50 cents a volume to

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bind, expenses mounted. Sibley realized that pamphlets should be bound separately and sought inexpensive ways to do it; this was critical, because the Faculty did not want to keep pamphlets at all. John Maccarty seemed to be the ideal solution for the problem of binding. Sibley attempted to obtain a college room in which John could set up his shop, doing all of the college work for a stipulated wage and having the privilege of supplementing it by taking in outside work. Before the space could be found, Maccarty died, and the Harvard University Bindery receded into the future.

In the sixties the increased activity of the Library compelled Sibley to begin the printing of various forms. Irked by printers' prices, he bought a press and equipment in 1863 and on that did the small printing of the Library until the college printer took over ten years later. He introduced the familiar 'Harvard College Library' letterhead in 1871. So far as possible, supplies were homemade. His library paste was made of buffalo glue and thick molasses. The year before he hired the first female he bought a secondhand lounge for the Library, but usually he could depend on discards. From the Brattle house he obtained three dining tables and twenty-five cane-bottomed chairs. He never squandered, and never overlooked details, down to the gift of two penwipers and the purchase of two penpoints. Quick to detect the usefulness of penny postcards, he purchased the first to appear. He quarreled with the Postmaster General over the institution of a charge of a cent for newspapers delivered by mail to the Library, and rowed bitterly with the Adams Express Company, which refused to follow his directions about forwarding what it called his 'little stinking bundles' of books.

Civil War inflation upset wage and salary scales as well as supply costs. As Assistant Librarian, Sibley had received a room, $500 a year, and 40 cents an hour for the period between 4 P.M. and the prayer bell. As Librarian he received $1,500 a year in a period of rapidly rising prices. In 1867 he asked for a 50 per cent increase on the ground that his work had doubled, but the Corporation gave him only $10 a quarter more, which he rightly said was 'pretty mean.' Still, he was well off by contrast with the other employees. Students who dusted books got $1.25 a day. In 1860 Morris O'Conner took a contract to clean all of the books in the Library for $40, and with this employed a crew which finished the work in a month. The next year John Donovan, a lad fresh from Ireland, was hired to dust the books for $2 a week. During

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the War, the pay of female help was increased to a scale of from 11 to 14 cents an hour. Sibley insisted that the girls be kept on an hourly basis, although there was steady administrative pressure to have them paid by the week. In 1873 the pay of the three skilled female assistants was raised to 20 cents an hour.

It was during Sibley's administration that there occurred the revolution in library hours which so profoundly affected employee and user alike. Because he opposed a liberalization which would have been administratively impossible, funds and staff considered, he has been unjustly classed with the antediluvians. When he became Librarian the College Laws provided one hour a week in which Freshmen and Sophomores might charge out books, and two hours for Juniors and Seniors. This schedule being unreasonable, he had been accustomed to let students take out books at other times. Finding that this service interrupted his other work, he proposed to President Walker that the official hours be doubled and enforced. After some discussion he extended the undergraduate borrowing hours to from 2 to 4 on each of the four secular days of the week that the Library was open. During his first years as Librarian he himself presided at the charging desk, but later he assigned the job to an assistant. In 1860 the delivery hours were increased from 9 to 1 and 2 to 5, Monday through Friday, except when the sun set earlier.[2] Saturdays and college vacations must, Sibley insisted, be kept for tasks, such as cataloguing, which had to be done without interruption. In 1863 he offered 'to allow access of Professors and Tutors to the Library from 3 to 4 o'clock when I am in town on Wednesday and Fridays this vacation.' With these expansions there was not enough call to justify keeping an assistant at the delivery desk during the hours that it was open, so there was installed a spring bell by which the visitor might summon help. In 1864 Gore was opened Monday mornings during college vacations, and the next year it was opened three mornings a week. In 1867 Sibley voluntarily abolished the noon-hour closing and for the first time opened the Library to readers on Saturdays. The next year he kept it open during the winter vacation and the spring recess, but in his annual report bitterly protested having to keep it open a part of the summer recess:

So far as I know, there is not a college or university library in the world where

[2] For a full account of the movements which terminated with this reform see Kimball C. Elkins, 'Foreshadowings of Lamont,' HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN, VIII (1954), 41–53.

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> so much is exacted of its library officers. "Outrageous" is the word which more than any other, I hear applied to it, and the epithet is sometimes accompanied with very strong qualifying adverbs.

He obtained some satisfaction by defiantly closing the Library on 1 January 1869, claiming that New Year's was considered a holiday.

One subject on which Sibley and his readers agreed was his reform of the Library catalogue. The volumes transferred from Harvard to Gore in 1841 bore numbers according to alcove and shelf, and were, so far as possible, so shelved in their new home. Gradually they were reclassified and renumbered, although not much progress could be made until Sibley became Librarian. In 1860 he proposed that, instead of printing a supplement to the catalogue of 1830–34, there be made a public card catalogue of books added to the Library since that date. The suggestion found favor, and the first cataloguing desk and trays were purchased. Then in 1861 the Library Committee asked Abbot to submit a plan for a classed catalogue of the entire Library. The plan was drawn and accepted, and Sibley was authorized to hire three additional female assistants to write the cards. He obtained the girls from the Cambridge High School, and they began work in May 1862. Although the accompanying reclassification was properly Abbot's work, Sibley did much of it himself. There were to be two catalogues. That for the public was short-title and on 5 by 2 cards, including both authors and subjects. The 'Librarian's catalogue' was to be full-entry, on long cards, and was eventually to cover the entire collection. The first cases for the public catalogue were bought in July 1862. The work was pushed through with speed. In the first year 35,762 cards were written. In 1875 Annie E. Hutchins was appointed cataloguer, and she was reported to have made more than 75,000 cards in the first year of her long career.

The newspaper collection represented a difficult cataloguing problem, for in the Ebeling volumes the papers are bound in a roughly chronological order. In 1870 Sibley put his attention to the task and devised a geographical, alphabetical, and chronological catalogue which was a wonder for its day, and a much better tool than is now available for finding newspapers at Harvard.

Early in his career Sibley laid down the rule that pamphlets should be catalogued as thoroughly as bound volumes because, he said, they were the most valuable part of any library which 'had reference to posterity.' For years this was the subject of a running fight with the

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Faculty, which in 1873 through the Library Council ordered the cataloguing of pamphlets suspended to permit the more expeditious cataloguing of books. After three years Sibley succeeded in having this modified to permit the cataloguing of important pamphlets.

More than most librarians Sibley realized that a public catalogue is a tool and not primarily an exercise of the art of logic; that a poor one which provides access to the books is better than an elaborate one which the ordinary user cannot fathom. In 1867 he printed for the use of students a seven-page pamphlet describing the catalogues.

When Sibley became Librarian the number of volumes stolen was running to about three dozen a year. In his report for 1857 he said:

> In relation to the Public Library it is painful to be obliged to say that among the many who are permitted to use it there are a few who are guilty of violating the Eighth Commandment. During the year thirty-seven volumes have been abstracted from Gore Hall.

To check this loss he forbade readers to take books from the alcoves without permission, and, as he expected, there followed a sharp drop in the number of books stolen. This restriction, however, gave new currency to the charges made by the men who had opposed his appointment, to the effect that his policy was antiquated and that it discouraged the use of the Library. In June 1859 the Faculty suggested to the Corporation that all persons connected with the University be given practically free access to the Library, and the Corporation referred the matter to Sibley. To this he replied, referring obviously to book collectors and possibly to Faculty members:

> Dr. Cogswell of the Astor Library, says, a person who has a specialty is not to be trusted without very great caution in the department in which he is particularly interested, for he will almost infallibly abstract the rarities.

Admitting the undergraduates to the alcoves would, he said, result in the loss of books by misplacing. In the Law Library students had access to the stacks, and 'Law Students sometimes tell me in very rough language that they cannot find the books.' Experience, he reported, showed that American college boys always wrecked a library when given the opportunity. At Harvard a Benjamin Franklin autograph had been cut from a book six months after it had been given to the Library. As a substitute to opening the alcoves, he proposed that the latest and best books be placed in the open-shelf collection in the main hall of Gore, and that there be prepared for the students an

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author and subject catalogue in which they could find what they wanted much more quickly than by browsing the shelves of the alcoves.

To the demand for free access Sibley replied by placing on the open shelves 200 periodicals, the material most wanted by the students, which had previously been kept locked; and he did give freer access to the alcoves. The latter policy, he believed, was responsible for an unparalleled outbreak of stealing. One valuable book was taken within twenty-four hours of its arrival, on the day of the annual inspection of the Library, while the Visiting Committee was at dinner! The stealing of valuable books like this he laid, not to the students, but to visitors who knew the worth of the volumes. In his annual report for 1862 he said:

> From the pocket of one person who had received special favors at the Library, but whom for some time I had suspected, I drew with my own hand a periodical which he was surreptitiously carrying off without having it charged. . . . The ideas of liberty are so latitudinarian with some persons that they do not reflect on the baseness or iniquity of such acts, or their liability to be arraigned before the civil authorities and punished as thieves. Death has more than once within my knowledge been the means of exposing such conduct.

In 1863 the problem of theft came to a head. The pilfering of books by the students reached a new high just as a Library Committee report bitterly attacked the Librarian because Gore Hall was not open longer hours and the access to the alcoves was not easier. The attack, like the one a decade earlier, was based on a totally unfounded idea that the rules had been more liberal in some golden age of the Library. It ignored the fact that Sibley had been responsible for great improvements, and that there simply was not the staff or room to permit the adoption of the proposals for liberalization. Sibley replied that the Harvard rules were the most liberal among American colleges, and that the partial opening of the Library during vacations provided statistics to show that the demand for this reform was greatly exaggerated. He defied the Committee, held his ground, and as a final insult omitted the critical report of the Committee from his bound file.

In the late sixties and seventies the problem of theft by the students was dwarfed by that of professionals seeking material for the collectors then bidding frantically for the great rarities of American colonial history. Winslow's *Good News from New England*, Harris' *Virginia*, and lesser rarities were stolen and the theft concealed by mutilating or

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hiding the bound alcove catalogues which served as shelf-lists. What appeared to be Harvard's copy of Cushman's *Discourse* turned up in the library of Henry M. Dexter, who took (for such a religious man) a very unreasonable attitude, and blamed Mr Sibley:

I will not say here — what I think one might almost be justified in saying — that [if] Harvard College keeps the choice books in its library in as careless a manner as Mr. Sibley represents to be the case, in accounting for the disappearance from it of its copy of this Discourse, it ought to lose them, but I will say that . . . it ought to *expect* to lose them.

So Sibley was criticized by the Faculty for not being liberal enough and by the collectors to whom he looked for gifts for being too liberal.

Much of Sibley's time had to be given over to negotiations on administrative subjects which are today recognized as being within the sole jurisdiction of the Librarian. For example, he felt that he had to ask the President or the Corporation for permission to exchange duplicates. He had to fight to stop the transfer of books from Gore Hall to the Law Library where, he said, experience had proved that they would be stolen by the students. His assistants assumed the right to bypass him in contacts with the Library Committee and the Corporation, and were so careless as to lose three years in succession the list of donors for his report. Encouraged by Abbot, Faculty members tried continually to change library policy, and Sibley regarded them, and even treated them, like the natural enemies of the Librarian. His diaries contain such notes as 'Charles Folsom in the Library prying into Library affairs,' and:

Difficulty with Prof. Bowen, whose disposition always is to exact every possible privilege and to avail himself of all (though in violation of the laws) that he can *get*. I peremptorily refused to let him take out a volume entitled "Waverly," because it did not come within the class relating to the "department of instruction," the books for which the Professors are allowed to keep out longer than the others. He made complaint about it in the Faculty meeting in the evening. He had defied me, before he brought the book, to keep back *any* book that he wanted saying if I did he should lay the matter before the College Corporation.

Because of such clashes and the growing misunderstandings, a Library Committee consisting of President Walker and Professors Felton, Child, and Eliot began meeting in the President's Office in 1859. Young Mr Eliot was first secretary and then chairman. This committee concerned itself chiefly with seeing that the library funds

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were disbursed in accordance with the wishes of the donors, and with the collection of lists of desiderata from the professors, which were passed along to Abbot and Sibley with instructions to buy the books on them. Policy matters were largely ignored.

However, the need of a policy committee became obvious in 1866 when Sibley put his hand into his own pocket and laid out $100 for a private edition of his annual report of 1864, in which he lashed back at a Library Committee report of the previous year which had indeed reflected severely on his administration because he would not accept Faculty demands as to an extension on library privileges. The startled committee replied that they had not intended to reflect on Mr Sibley. For twenty years the Administration had avoided taking sides in the battle over library policy, but on 18 January 1867 a special committee of the Overseers proposed the creation of a Library Council which would, besides taking over the functions of the Library Committee, assume the responsibility for the management of the Library, and exercise various administrative functions which would normally fall within the authority of the Librarian. This report did not mention Sibley or his office, but came out strongly for the increased service which his critics demanded, and urged the stringent weeding which he feared:

> Books, superseded by more recent and more thorough works, may be positively mischievous to persons not sufficiently versed in the subject to know their relative value. Officers of the college speak of the rubbish and chaff which ought to be removed from the collections in their department.

Against this proposal for weeding Sibley marshaled so much adverse comment in the Harvard community that when the Corporation set up the Library Council early in 1867 it unanimously rejected this part of the report of the special committee.

To the new body was granted authority far beyond that exercised by the old Library Committee:

> It shall be the duty of the council to see that the laws and regulations of the library are enforced, and to propose from time to time to the corporation such changes in them as may be for the interest of the University; to direct the purchase of books to the extent of the funds appropriated for that purpose; to appoint all persons employed in the library excepting the librarian, the assistant librarian and the janitor, and to fix the rate of compensation to be paid to such persons from the funds provided for that purpose.

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Sibley was invited to attend the first meetings of the Library Council, but he was so obviously hostile that it formed the habit of consulting with Abbot on library matters and using him as its agent. In his twelfth report as Librarian, in 1867, Sibley formally relinquished to the new body his campaign to obtain an endowment and a new building for the Library, but on other matters he clashed with it.

One of the Council's first acts was to raise the wages of female employees to a range of 15 to 21 cents an hour. This Sibley bitterly protested because the old rates were based on the going scale in Boston, and any change should have been calculated on the increased cost of living instead of being arbitrary. But the major clash came over the question of binding in the covers of periodicals. Professor Gibbs, Dean of the Lawrence Scientific School, who thought that the volumes were spoiled by the binding in of covers, carried through the Council and the Corporation a vote that the Librarian be requested not to bind in covers of periodicals unless they contained information not in the pages. At the time Sibley was not informed of this vote; which is not surprising, for his only contact with the Library Council was the receipt of its occasional directives by mail. A year later Gibbs found that the covers were still being bound in, and he verbally attacked Sibley, giving him the impression that it was ordered that no covers be bound in. 'I was somewhat annoyed,' said the Librarian, 'to be so treated by a man who knew no more about the Library than I did about his gallipots.' As for the Library Council, he said, it acted 'as if they knew nothing about a library except to get the greatest privileges with the fewest restraints and without regard to the getting of things prepared for use.' Without difficulty he obtained from leading librarians and book dealers letters explaining the importance of binding in covers, and turned these over to President Eliot with remarks which he repeated in substance in his diary:

> It seems very small business for the Library Council to spend their time on such matters but as one notion after another was broached by persons who knew little or nothing of the practical or working part of a library, I thought it well enough to do something to check their crude ideas.

The Council and Corporation were too proud to back water in the case of the periodical covers, but they let it be understood that if Sibley made no fuss he could do what he wanted in the matter.

Eliot, convinced by this case that there was a good deal of validity

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in the Librarian's criticism of the Library Council, urged Sibley to accept appointment to that body. Although admitting that this seemed to be the best solution, Sibley held off for seven awkward years, until on 31 January 1877 the President simply informed him that he had been appointed to the Council. It was too late in Sibley's administration for this reform to bear fruit, but it made the work of his successor much simpler.

That Sibley's administration ended peacefully was largely due to the fact that Charles William Eliot was an administrator who could keep above petty bickering and see details in perspective. Unfortunately Sibley is known to a majority of those who have heard his name only by a story which Eliot, and his sons and friends after him, used to tell with amusement. It told how the President one day met the Librarian hurrying across the Yard and asked where he was going. Sibley replied: 'The Library is locked up and every book is in it but two, and I know where they are and I am going after them.' The generation of Eliot's sons assumed that this story illustrated Sibley's primitive ideas about libraries and books. In fact, the Harvard rules, like those of many other libraries in that day, ordered the Librarian once a year to get in every book and to lock the Library for a formal check and visitation, performed by a committee of the Overseers. Until 1854 this Examining Committee itself counted the books on the shelves of Gore and checked the count against the alcove catalogues, but that year they gave up after an hour. Sibley's accessions soon made the annual check a great chore; in 1859 it occupied two persons for three weeks.

After each annual check the titles of all missing books were posted on the bulletin board. The story of Sibley's going after the two missing volumes probably had its origin in an incident during Eliot's tutorship, for in 1858 there were only two books out on loan at the time of the visitation. But in the first three years of Sibley's administration book circulation about doubled. Students and Faculty were using more, and scholars from the outside world, some of them attracted by Sibley's library reports in the newspapers, were asking for books. The result was that at the time of the annual count of 1860 there were no less than fifty volumes out, in spite of the fact that the Librarian had advertised in all Boston newspapers for their return. The worst offenders among the outside borrowers were ministers. At one time Sibley proposed to advertise a delinquent in the Philadelphia newspapers and would have done so had not a Boston friend of the culprit taken the

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train to recover the volumes and save the offender from public indignity. In general, Sibley's experience with outside borrowers was bitter and will explain, if not justify, his refusal to make a reasonable interlibrary loan to the Library of Congress in 1874.

Within the University it was not the undergraduates who were the seriously delinquent borrowers. At the annual examination of 1861 every book charged to a student had been returned except one that had been left in a Boston horsecar. The Faculty were another matter; unlike the students, they used books during the summer vacation. When the Examining Committee reprovingly pointed out to Mr Sibley the gaps on the shelves of Gore, he knew whom to blame. One of his first acts as Librarian was to take the question of delinquent borrowers among the college officers to the Board of Overseers. To the modern researcher who suffers from the egotism of professors who for years sequester in their own offices all books which they think that they might have use for sometime, Sibley's report to the Examining Committee of 1857 may not sound too stringent:

> Delinquencies of this nature are not common; but they are so dishonorable, to use no stronger word, that I consider them deserving of public exposure and reprehension. They teach us the unwelcome lesson that we cannot extend even to all who have the reputation of being gentlemen and scholars unrestricted privileges in the use of the Library.

In 1868 he asked the Corporation to allow him to cut off the library privileges of Faculty members who would neither return books called in for the annual examination nor pay the fines for overdue books. The Corporation replied by reminding him that the College Laws gave Faculty members special privileges. Probably it thought that his request was in part motivated by the fact that, as he often pointed out, he was kept at the Library during vacations while the other college officers were 'luxuriating in relief from their duties.' He still took up with the Corporation special cases like that of Professor Dennett, who obstinately refused to return twenty-five books or to pay the fines on them.

By 1870 the closing of the Library for the annual examination had become quite impractical, so Sibley substituted the system of beginning the shelf-reading some months ahead, and of checking returned books off the list of those not on the shelf. In this way the count was taken without either a shutdown or an unpleasant struggle to get books in by a certain date. This new practice made the gathering of

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the committee for the annual examination quite perfunctory. In 1874, having no list of the members of the committee, Sibley sent out no notices. The next year Ralph Waldo Emerson, the chairman of the committee, was to have sent out the notices, but failed to do so. So died an outgrown institution which had its origins in the seventeenth century.

So far as Sibley was concerned, no institution, building, or practice was sacred because it was old; he welcomed any change which was an improvement. The longest and bitterest battle of his career was to have Gore Hall, which was 'unfit for a library from the first because erected in ignorance of the wants of a library,' replaced by a functional building. It was gloomy Gothic, and what little light came through the narrow windows could not, because of a taboo quite general among libraries in that generation, be augmented by artificial means. Before the building was a dozen years old stones had begun to fall from its high pinnacles, to the great danger of life and limb. By 1872 large pieces of stucco were falling from the interior arches, menacing the readers and creating a grit which got among and into the books. The cellar was too wet to be used for book storage. For several weeks a year water ran through it, a situation remedied only when Sibley had a drain constructed in 1860. The towers, which had to be used for book storage, were nearly as damp as the cellar. Throughout the building the walls were only one stone thick, with the result that in winter frost formed on the inside unless there was, by chance, enough heat from the furnace to melt it off. A few days after the furnace was let out in the spring, green mold formed on some of the walls. In some parts of the building books had to be taken from the shelves and opened to dry after each damp spell. Sometimes they were so wet that they visibly steamed when brought near the heat.

The steam boiler which was installed when Gore was built never adequately heated more than the first alcove, and never warmed the damp drafts which swooped among the arches and pillars. During the winter readers had to wear their hats and overcoats. When Sibley employed females to do the writing he had to bring blinds from Holden Chapel to serve as cold-weather screens around them. The girls created another problem which he called to the attention of President Walker on 21 October 1859:

All the persons who are employed in Gore Hall suffer from want of a water closet and appurtenances. The young women have no accommodations nearer

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than their homes. The inconvenience and the injury to health will be greater when the weather is colder and the ground covered. I take the liberty of asking you to lay the subject before the Corporation, and hope that accommodations of the best kind may be provided as early as practicable, not only for the comfort of us workers but that library visitors may not be obliged to wash their hands at the nose of the pump, as is now the case, or in an old rotten sink, which had served out its time in Harvard Hall before it was moved to Gore Hall more than eighteen years ago.

Whatever the sufferings of that winter may have been, spring brought relief. Fresh Pond water was piped into the cellar of Gore Hall and the conveniences were ready for use on 27 June 1860.

The Gore staff suffered almost as much from lack of work space. Boxes had to be opened and unpacked in the area used as a reading room. Since the building was a perfect whispering gallery, the noise distracted the readers and drew their attention to the new books, to which they helped themselves before the accession records were made. These drawbacks to Gore, and its great unusable and unheatable spaces, made Sibley the advocate of functional library buildings in which he foresaw most of the improvements introduced by the architects in the next century.

In 1863 plans of the Corporation to build a new dormitory close to the north side of Gore created a new menace, of which Sibley complained:

Students coming from carousals in the night, as they sometimes do, would not be likely to go much out of their way to let off their high excitement, but if on their way to the new building they were to pass so near the Library, untenanted, they would be very likely to do mischief by breaking doors, perhaps entering through the windows.

As it was, they broke windows while trying to knock down horse-chestnuts. Sibley's protest staved off the threat of the dormitory, and his report of 1863, in which he eloquently argued that Gore would never be a satisfactory library building, finally brought agreement that a new structure should be erected. The plans provided that it should go up on the site of the present Grays. Sibley deeply regretted that the rent which the University received from Wadsworth House prevented that from being torn down so that the library building might go on the line of the street. He should have been forewarned by the fact that President Hill, after looking at the plans for the new library, took off his coat and hat and wielded a spade diligently to plant ivy

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and trumpet vines around Gore. They were indeed venerable before Gore came down.

The dormitory which Sibley had shooed away from Gore went up on the site behind Wadsworth House where he had expected to put the new library. Attention was then shifted to the site of Lamont, where by 1865 it was agreed that the new library building should go. Sibley drew plans for a plain, unostentatious, functional building, built for the centuries, with double or triple walls. Because of the elimination of waste space the building was to be relatively small, but designed to facilitate external expansion when the first unit was filled. Just when all were agreed that this building should be erected, the agitation for a Civil War memorial began. Although Sibley regarded the plans for Memorial Hall as 'beautiful,' he was terrified by the implication of competition for building funds: 'The excitement about it is a great strain on my nerves.'

When Eliot came into the Presidency in 1869 he informed Sibley that his solution of the library problem was an improvement of the heating system and an enlargement of Gore. Bitterly the Librarian fought for a new building and opposed the 'improvements.' He argued that the President's proposed structural alterations to combat dampness would make the building sag. The proposed wooden sheathing would reduce the size of the alcoves and create a fire hazard. When he heard that Eliot had asked the college carpenter to find a large hot-air furnace to go into the main room of Gore he protested vigorously that it would spread dirt and dry out the books; but it went in, and was lighted on 1 January 1874.

Before each step the President invited Sibley's scorn by asking his advice on the successive plans for alterations; but unfortunately the plans for the enlargement of the building were not shown to the Librarian until they had been drawn in detail by men who obviously knew nothing about libraries. Sibley walked into Boston on hot afternoons to beg members of the Corporation to scrap these plans in favor of a new building designed to house a million volumes. He went to Saratoga and sought funds from the millionaires gathered there. Finally he offered to will the Corporation $20,000 which was to accumulate until it would provide a new and functional library building. Meeting defeat everywhere, he turned to Eliot's plans and revised them to provide the new addition with iron stacks and shelves, steam heat, low ceilings, and plain window glass. His passion against library Gothic

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had already eliminated that danger. In his annual report of 1876 he formally registered his protest against the extension, which had been begun, insisting that in the end a new building would have been far less expensive. In April 1877 he moved into the new wing and his office, but within the month he told Eliot that he intended to resign.

Sibley had some difficulty in preparing his final annual report because his sight had so failed that even with all aids he could not see his own handwriting.

> It is not without a feeling of sadness that I leave a situation in which I have spent so many years. More than half of a long life has been devoted to its duties. It has taken precedence of all other pleasures and employments. But the recollection of the scenes and enjoyments I have had here will continue when my connection is dissolved. I cannot divorce myself and go forth as a stranger from what has been the home of my heart so long. The Library will continue to be like an old home as long as I live.

He was content to surrender the administration to so able a man as Justin Winsor, and to him he handed the reins on 31 August 1877. The first two acts of the new administration were to put a 'lady' (not a 'female assistant') at the charging desk, and to begin moving into the new wing. The last entry in Sibley's library journal is: 'Old library entrance closed and all admitted to the new entrance.' The entrance was new but the goal was the same. The Winsor administration did not, as tradition would have it, mean long-delayed progress, modernization, and revolutionary changes, but rather the acceptance of library goals which fell considerably short of the unobtainable ideal for which Sibley had fought.

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