Harry Elkins Widener and A.S.W. Rosenbach: Of Books and Friendship

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Accessibility
Harry Elkins Widener and A.S.W. Rosenbach:
Of Books and Friendship

Leslie A. Morris

"The most touching story . . . in all the history of book collecting" is that of
Harry Elkins Widener, whose portrait gazes down the marble stairs at all who
enter the Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library at Harvard. Yet surprisingly little
is known about the collector who became so central a figure in the history of the
Harvard College Library. The eulogies written upon his death sketch only the
outline of his life, giving little detail of his collecting; and the anecdotes about him
passed down through generations of Harvard tour guides are largely, if not wholly,
apocryphal. One can, however, recover a more complete picture of Harry
Widener's life and legacy by examining his relationship with another legendary
figure in the book world, Dr. A. S. W. Rosenbach of Philadelphia. Friends as well
as fellow bibliophiles, Rosenbach and Widener left letters, sales books, and catalogs
that, together, paint a fascinating portrait of two bookmen and the book world in
the early years of this century. The tale begins when both were just beginners—
Widener a novice collector, and Rosenbach a fledgling bookseller.

Harry Elkins Widener (1885-1912) was born into one of Philadelphia's wealthiest families. The patriarch of the Widener family, and founder of the family's fortune, was Harry's remarkable grandfather, Peter A. B. Widener. Born in Philadelphia in 1834, P. A. B. (as he was usually known) left school at sixteen to join his father as a brickmaker. He decided, however, that brickmaking was not for him, and apprenticed himself to a butcher. Soon he opened his own shop, then a chain of butcher stores, and made substantial profits during the Civil War by securing a contract to supply mutton to Federal troops. After the war, he entered

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The following abbreviations are used:
RCA Rosenbach Company Archive, Rosenbach Museum & Library, Philadelphia, PA
UA Harvard University Archives, UA III. 50.3.119.50.5, box 4
WC Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Collection. Correspondence is housed in six albums with the following titles: "Letters of Harry Elkins Widener to Luther S. Livingston, 1900-1912"; "Letters of Mrs. Widener to Luther Livingston, 1913-1914"; "Acknowledgments to H.E. Widener—Stevenson Memoir"; "Acknowledgments to Mrs. Widener—1911 [i.e., 1910] Catalogue"; "Acknowledgments to Mrs. Widener—Stevenson Catalogue"; and "Mrs. Widener to Mrs. Livingston."
Philadelphia politics and eventually became city treasurer. As the city spread westward, he saw that public transit needed to be developed. With his friend William Eikins he bought up the street car lines, and within a few years they consolidated all the lines in the city as the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company. Later he diversified into railroads, helped to organize U.S. Steel and the American Tobacco Co., and invested heavily in Standard Oil.

Like many nineteenth-century American millionaires, when P. A. B. Widener became rich he began to collect art. His collection contained works such as the Cooper Madonna by Raphael, Rembrandt’s “The Mill,” and works by Mantegna, Titian, Vermeer, Manet, Degas, and Renoir, all housed in an enormous, Versailles-like mansion of 110 rooms on thirty acres outside Philadelphia called Lynnewood Hall. At the time of his death in 1915, his fortune was estimated at between $15 and $100 million.

P. A. B. had three sons: Harry K. (who died as a child), George, and Joseph. George Widener married Eleanor Eikins, daughter of his father’s partner, William Eikins, and eventually took over the day-to-day management of the family’s business.

* See “Hope for a great house at the brink,” <em>Philadelphia Inquirer</em>, 20 August 1933, pp. 81 and 82; The November 1932 issue of <em>Profiles</em> contains five pages of color photographs of Lynnewood Hall, an advertisement from New York studio Elizabeth Street, who offered for sale some of the architectural elements of the house.
interests. Although not a serious collector himself, he enjoyed the rest of the family's collecting passions. Joseph, P. A. B.'s youngest son, entered fully into his father's collecting interests, refining the collection of paintings, collecting tapestries and porcelain, and becoming an important collector of French illustrated books and illuminated manuscripts.3 Harry Elkins Widener once remarked of his family: "We are all collectors. My grandfather collects paintings, my mother collects silver and porcelains, Uncle Joe collects everything, and I collect books."4

Harry Widener was the eldest of the three children of George and Eleanor Elkins Widener, born in Philadelphia on January 3, 1885. The family all lived at Lynnewood Hall, and Harry attended the DeLancey School in Philadelphia and the Hill School in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, before entering Harvard in 1903. His club memberships at Harvard indicate that, socially, he was part of the elite of his class. He was selected for membership in D.K.E. (the "Dickey"), the inner circle of one of Harvard's oldest clubs, the Institute of 1770; elected to the "final" club Phi Delta Psi (the "Owl"); and, most coveted of all, selected for the Hasty Pudding Club, where he performed in his senior year as Abadiah Burdock Butterworth, in "The Lotos Eaters." His studies focused on history. Of the twenty-seven courses he took over four years, eleven were in history; two each in English, Fine Arts, and Greek; one in Latin; his single science course was Geology. However, it was in this geology course that he found a word to serve as his price code when he began collecting: mineralogy.5

The second character in this story, Abraham Simon Wolf Rosenbach, came from a different world. He was eight-and-a-half years older than Harry Widener, born in Philadelphia in the centennial year of 1876, the youngest of seven children. His father, Morris Rosenbach, ran a successful soft goods store, and became one of the leading Jewish merchants of the city. In the year of A. S. W.'s birth, Morris Rosenbach invested in a lavishly illustrated catalog of his goods for visitors to the huge Centennial Exposition. Unfortunately, the expense of the catalog, combined with poor sales, drove him into bankruptcy.

A. S. W. Rosenbach was a shy and bookish child. As he grew older, he spent more and more time with his mother's brother, Moses Poleck, one of Philadelphia's most eccentric antiquarian booksellers. Uncle Mo was first a lover of books, then a scholar, and lastly a bookseller. He hated to sell books he thought were important—a characteristic he passed on to his nephew. Over the years his small second-floor store on Commerce Street became crammed with books and papers, and Philadelphia collectors who wanted to buy had to persuade him to sell. He was by all accounts a taciturn man; but he tolerated the presence of his bookish nephew, and young Rosenbach soaked up the bookselling atmosphere and lore. By his senior year of high school he was a confirmed bibliophile. He was editor of the school paper, and his first publication was an article in it called "Bibliomania" that told the

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3 Joseph E. Widener (1872–1943) gave the Widener collections of paintings and French drawings, prints and books to the National Gallery, Washington, D.C., in 1942, in memory of his father. His illuminated manuscripts and his four Shakespeare folios were given to the Free Library of Philadelphia in 1943 by his two children, P. A. B. Widener and Josephine Widener Wickefeld.

4 Said to A. Edward Newton, quoted in Newton, American, 345.

5 UA. The Institute was a sophomore club, and the first forty or fifty students elected each year became members of D.K.E.; many members of the Institute went on to become members in the Pudding. A final club is so called because members of one final club cannot be members of any other final club. The Hasty Pudding Club was not a final club, but it was nevertheless difficult to get elected.

6 A price code works thus:

M I N E R A L O G Y
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0
It must be a ten-letter word without repeating letters. In addition, Harry also used an x to equal 0 (xy or yx = 00). A collector uses a code in his purchase ledger or in the book itself to record the price paid, without any other collector being able to tell.

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story of the 1812 battle in the auction room between the Marquis of Bathford and
Earl Spencer over the Valdaref Boccaccio—not your typical high school topic!

Rosenbach clearly had the inclinations of a scholar, and with financial help from
his older brothers and his mother he entered the University of Pennsylvania. He
was the only member of his family to seek a higher education. He received his bac-
chelor’s degree in 1898 and stayed on to study Elizabethan and Jacobean litera-
ture, receiving his doctorate in 1901.

Afterwards, for more than a year, Dr. Rosenbach (often called simply the
Doctor) continued in much the same way he always had. He lived at home, waited
on by his mother and sisters, and supported financially by his older brother Philip.
Philip had had a variety of businesses, from restaurants to stationary stores, none
of them particularly successful. The latest fancy-goods store was doing poorly, so
Philip had the idea that he and his youngest brother should buy a portion of their
Uncle Mo’s book stock and set up in business together. Dr. Rosenbach had met a
number of Philadelphia collectors over the years while working in Uncle Mo’s
store, and he had a firm command of the bibliophile culture. Philip thought that
with his business skills (Philip always thought of himself as a successful busi-
nessman, despite all his failures), and his brother’s intellectual background, together they
should be able to make a success of a store that would cater to the collecting tastes
of Philadelphia’s wealthiest families.

And so, in 1903, Philip and Dr. A. S. W. Rosenbach started the Rosenbach
Company, a store that sold antique furniture, silver, objets d’art, and rare books and
manuscripts. For stocks, they had not only part of Uncle Mo’s bearded treasures,
but also, an assignatum, to be paid for as sold, the books and manuscripts of
the wealthy Philadelphia collector Clarence S. Bement. Bement had been a customer
of Uncle Mo, was fond of the literary young Dr. Rosenbach, and, his interest in
book collecting somewhat dimished, decided it might be interesting to see how
much money his books would bring. The Rosenbachs opened a store at 1320
Walnut Street in Philadelphia, close to the office buildings where most
Philadelphiaans conducted business, and set about cultivating collectors.

It obviously was desirable for the Rosenbachs to make the acquaintance of the
collecting Wideners. Sometime, probably during Christmas vacation in 1903,
Harry Widener and Dr. Rosenbach were introduced. (Harry had just started his
junior year at Harvard.) It is most likely that they met through the agency of
Clarence Bement, who was both a friend of P. A. B. Widener and one of the
backers of the still-struggling Rosenbach Company. Harry had just begun to
collect—his first “serious” purchase was earlier that year, a presentation copy of
the third edition of Charles Dickens’s Oliver Twist (London: Chapman and Hall, 1843),
illustrated by George Cruikshank, which he bought from the Philadelphia book-
seller W. Harry Cameron for $200. Dr. Rosenbach was not much older than
Harry, so it seems natural that a mutual enthusiasm for books and literature should
develop not only into a business relationship, but a friendship as well.

1 Noted in Catalogue of Books in the Library of Henry E. Widener, manuscripts, Widener Collection, George
660–71, and that Harry began collecting in 1892; Rosenbach, in the introduction to the Stevenson
catalog, says Harry began to collect first editions of
Stevenson in 1894. Harry’s manuscript catalog, which records his pur-
chasings prior to the publication of his 1913 printed
catalog, records several purchases before 1905 in 1892, a
later edition of A. Becker’s Comic History of England,
purchased from M. Murray for under $3, and in 1904 a
reference book, James Gibb’s, the Canterbury (1841) from
D. McLain for less than $2, and Dr. (Works of Charles
Dickens) (1843) from Cameron for $1.30. None of these
is listed in his 1905 catalog; The Oliver Twist is listed in
the 1910 catalog.
The Wideners invited the young bookseller to Lynnewood Hall a few weeks later, in late January 1906. As many collectors later testified, no one could match Rosenbach when he set out to ingratiate himself. His academic credentials were impressive, he had an endless supply of anecdotes (many learned at the knee of his Uncle Mo) that made the books he handled come alive, and he had the irresistible enthusiasm of a salesman convinced that his wares were better than anything else on the market. The first of the Wideners to succumb to Rosenbach's salesmanship was P. A. B., Harry's grandfather. He spent $8,000 on finely-bound sets of the classic authors and color-plate books, and a few weeks later spent more than $18,000 on color-plate books as a slightly belated nineteenth birthday present for Harry. Harry had become interested in the work of Cruikshank and Rowlandson while researching costumes for Hasty Pudding Club productions, and his mother encouraged this burgeoning collecting interest.

It was a propitious start to Harry Widener's book collecting. Although Harry purchased two or three books for his collection before he met Dr. Rosenbach late in 1905, it is clear that his acquaintance with the Doctor started to influence the direction of his collecting. Only two months after first visiting Lynnewood Hall, Rosenbach convinced Mrs. Widener that for her son to be a serious collector he had to have a set of the four folios of Shakespeare. This was a major leap for a beginning collector. The Doctor did not have the First Folio in stock at that moment, but he did have the second, third, and fourth. Mrs. Widener bought them for $8,700.

Within two months of their first encounter with the persuasive Dr. Rosenbach, the Widener family spent almost $50,000 on books. Although his success with such an important collecting family undoubtedly gratified the young bookseller, Rosenbach made a profit of only $5,000 on the sales. Practically everything he sold the family he had on consignment, and on this material he took only the standard ten per cent commission. But he was learning at first hand what would sell, and developing confidence in his salesmanship. Although the money from these sales was important to Rosenbach—after all, it was how he supported himself—more significant was the fact that he had, after three somewhat marginal years in the book business, his first important patrons.

Harry's family background made it seem almost inevitable that he should collect something, and his grandfather, uncle, and mother, all collectors themselves, gave him every encouragement. His interest in color-plate books was to be expected given his family's interest in the visual arts, and Dr. Rosenbach in later years remarked that all collectors seem to begin with the humorous and colorful works of Cruikshank—as indeed Harry did. Concurrent with his increasing interest in nineteenth-century illustrated books, Harry Widener began to look for first editions of the writers whose books he had read and liked: Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, Alfred Tennyson, and (perhaps his greatest enthusiasm) Robert

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Louis Stevenson. According to Dr. Rosenbach, Harry read Treasure Island no fewer than nineteen times. During 1905, Harry added first editions by these authors to his growing collection.

As the friendship between Widener and Rosenbach grew, so did the influence of Rosenbach’s philosophy of book collecting and book collecting. This philosophy is stated clearly in the introduction of the first catalog issued by the Rosenbach Company, in 1904: “It is not rarity alone that places the value upon a book, although the word sounds enticingly to the ear of the bibliophile. It is the intrinsic worth of the volume itself, its place in literature, history or the arts, that sends the prices up . . . .” The Doctor passionately believed in great books and, as he grew more experienced, he would pay fantastic sums for books he believed in and then sell them for even more fantastic sums. It was natural for him to try to guide Harry Widener and his mother away from what Rosenbach thought were less important books. Equally, however, Rosenbach never lost sight of the fact that he could make more money by selling great books. Guiding Harry Widener to a broader vision of collecting had monetary as well as philosophical reasons.

But Harry Widener, although he could be persuaded, kept true to one basic collecting principle: “No matter how important a book or manuscript may be I only want those which interest me.” He did not collect, as some collectors of his generation did, because he felt it was the right thing for a wealthy gentleman to do; he collected books because he loved literature.

In the fall of 1905, as Harry started his final year at Harvard, it is apparent that his mother, at least, listened closely to the collecting philosophy of the persuasive Dr. Rosenbach. In September, she bought for Harry the folio works of Ben Jonson and Beaumont and Fletcher. At the same time she purchased more than fifty Cruikshank items, Dr. Samuel Johnson’s Bible, and fifteen sets of extra-illustrated volumes, many from the collection of Philadelphia collector and Widener friend Clarence S. Bevan. Two months later, she added a presentation copy of David COPPERFIELD. For Christmas, Mrs. Widener gave Harry the agreement between Dickens and his publishers for Sketches by Boz, some Rowlandson drawings, and a few other minor items. Harry’s own purchases from Rosenbach were more modest, as belied his student status: a presentation copy of Cruikshank’s AFTER’S DAUGHTER for $95, and eighteen additional Cruikshank items for $68.75. In 1906, Harry also purchased from the English dealers Maggs and Robinson and from the Boston dealer Charles E. Larrieu, but Rosenbach’s close proximity to Harry’s family in Philadelphia, and their growing friendship, clearly heightened his influence.

A few months later, in March 1907, the collection of William Van Antwerp was to be auctioned at Sotheby’s in London. Included in the collection was a good copy of the First Folio of Shakespeare, a key piece missing from Harry Widener’s collection. With the encouragement of Mrs. Widener (who would be providing the financing), it was agreed that Dr. Rosenbach should go to London for the sale with a hefty bid on Harry’s behalf. It was the Doctor’s first trip to London. It was also his first chance to make a big splash in the sales rooms and to prove himself publicly to his major client.

On board the Conte d’or en route to England, Rosenbach met the distinguished London bookseller Bernard Alfred Quaritch, who was returning to London for the Van Antwerp sale. Rosenbach knew that Quainech might be a competitor for the
First Folio, as it was exactly the kind of book Quaritch would buy for stock or for a customer. Over drinks one evening Rosenbach asked Quaritch if Quaritch would be willing to handle the bid for him. This was a shrewd move on the Doctor’s part, because in this way Quaritch would be eliminated as a competitor. As the Doctor related the story in later years, Quaritch said, “How much do you intend to bid? If it’s too low I’ll buy it myself.” “Five thousand pounds” was Rosenbach’s reply (that would be approximately $22,500). Quaritch said “That is a bid, I’ll get it for you.” And he did, buying it for Rosenbach and Harry Widener for £3,600. It was the highest price a Shakespeare folio had ever brought. “I was shaking like the proverbial aspen leaf, to a degree that I have never done since,” Rosenbach recalled years later, when he had six or seven First Folios under his belt.” Mrs. Widener also purchased for Harry a first edition of Thomas Gray’s Elegy from the Van Antwerp sale, as well as the 1640 edition of Shakespeare’s Poems. While in London, Rosenbach made the rounds of the dealers to replenish his stock with books to tempt the taste of the Widener family.

But this foray into “classic” English literature did not mean that Harry neglected color-plate books and nineteenth-century authors. During 1907 he purchased a complete set of Randolph Caldecott’s children’s books and forty Kate Greenaway titles from Pickering and Chatto in London. He and his mother also bought more than sixty nineteenth-century costume books from Rosenbach and continued to purchase heavily books and manuscripts by Dickens, Thackeray, Stevenson, and Cruikshank.

Shortly after adding the First Folio to the shelves in his library, Harry Widener graduated from Harvard and joined his grandfather, father, and uncle in managing the family’s myriad business interests. His office was in the Land Title Building in central Philadelphia, a short walk to the premises of the Rosenbach Company. Now that he was a working man, Harry began approaching his collecting more systematically. Although he was the favorite son and grandson of a wealthy family, he himself did not have large sums to spend. During his student years all the major purchases for his collection were gifts from his mother. (It seems likely that every time Harry Widener sighed that he could not afford a book, Rosenbach dropped a hint in the ear of Harry’s mother, so perhaps the distinction between what Harry bought and what Mrs. Widener bought should be blurred.) Once he was earning a salary, Harry became more willing to buy himself, although he would often remark, as he did to bookseller Luther Livingston, “I could not touch anything at present as I want just to pay off my debts.” When an important sale was announced, he would stop buying from dealers to start saving his money for what he wanted at the auction. The Rosenbach Company’s files contain a list of 165 desiderata, drawn up by Harry in February of 1908, with his scrawled instructions to the Doctor to “fill in the prices” of the books. The items range in importance and price from Raphael Holinshed’s Chronicles for $690 (his mother bought this for him in 1909 for $750) and the first English translation of Don Quixote for $525.

12 It is difficult to determine in many cases which books were purchased by Harry, and which were purchased for him by his mother, and it is possible that this distinction has no real meaning. The records of the Rosenbach Co. provide such information for books purchased from Dr. Rosenbach, but the records of other booksellers mentioned here are not so complete. Harry’s manuscript collection catalog (noted above) does sometimes note “EEW” to indicate that a book was purchased by his mother.
13 Harry Widener to Luther Livingston, 6 December 1909. WC.
(purchased by Harry for $57.50 in 1908); to $4.50 for the 1819 sequel to Byron's
*Don Juan*, which he bought in 1908 for $7.95. In all, it is an extremely ordered
approach to collecting. Obviously Harry Widener was not a young man to let his
heart rule his head.

Harry’s belief in his collecting sources was, appropriately for a man in his early
twenties, modest. Acknowledging his novice status, he sought the company of
more experienced collectors, visiting the library of his grandfather’s close friend J.
P. Morgan (whose librarian, Belle da Costa Greene, provided Harry with a letter
of introduction to bookseller Luther Livingston), and those of Harry B. Smith and
William A. White. He also sought the advice of such notable bibliographers as
Clement Shorter, Thomas J. Wae, Edward Gose, F. S. Ferguson, and Stevenson
Colonel W. F. Prideaux. “Nor was he particularly aggressive in building his
collection, deferring to his elders: about a Shelley item he wrote “I would not for
the world think of butting in on it until Mr. Morgan has made up his mind.””

But Harry’s modesty did not much restrict his buying. His purchase in 1908 of
more than eighty titles at the sale of the Stevenson collector George M. Williamson
greatly augmented his Stevenson collection. He added Thackeray and Dickens
items, and expanded his nineteenth-century literature collection with items of
Algernon Charles Swinburne and Walter Pater, plus a major collection of Robert
Browning’s works, largely purchased from Maggs, Quaritch, and Ernest Dressel
North. By the end of 1909 his collection had grown to some 1,500 items, and this
prompted him to think about what would happen to the collection should he die.
After discussion with his mother, he drew up his will, and signed it on 6 October
1909. It is only two paragraphs long, excluding illegals, and worth printing in its
entirety:

“...I give and bequeath to my mother, absolutely, all my property of every kind
and description. It is, however, my desire, as expressed to her, that whenever in
her judgment Harvard University will make arrangements for properly caring for
my collection of books, she shall give them to said University to be known as the
“Harry Ekins Widener Collection”.

“I appoint my father, George D. Widener, Executor of this my Will.”

It does seem odd, almost morbid, that Harry thought his parents would survive
him. Then again, as has been shown, Harry was a prudent and methodical
collector, and perhaps he simply wanted to state formally his intention for his
collection “just in case.” More significant than the will’s possible prediction of an
early death, however, is that it demonstrates the importance of the collection to
Harry, the strength of his attachment to Harvard, and the trust and sympathy that
linked Harry and his mother.

Harry Widener was elected a member of the Bibliophiles Society of Boston
in 1908, and of the Grolier Club in 1909, marks of his acceptance by others as a

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64 References in correspondence between Harry Widener and Luther Livingston.
65 Harry Widener to Luther Livingston, 7 July 1911, WC.
66 Bill of Harry Ekins Widener, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, 28 June 1915. The will was probated on 28
May 1916. His personal property was valued at $18,000—meaningfully, the exact sum chosen by Mr.
Widener to endow the Widener Memorial Room and its contents.
67 He was nominated by Clarence Bement. There was a

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Harvard University - Houghton Library / 1000879.xml_756905858
collector. As part of the Grolier membership process, he wrote about his collecting (he had then been collecting for four years, and was twenty-four years old):

I understand that you want to know the lines I collect on, which is rather difficult to say as I collect chiefly the books which interest me. My object is to have eventually as complete a collection of nineteenth century writers and illustrators as possible, while of course I hope to have a few of the great works of the earlier periods—such as Milton, Burton, and Shakespeare.

At present the finest part of my library consists of Shakespeare, Extra-Illustrated Books—largely from the Daily Collection, and almost complete sets of the first issues of Swinburne, Pater, Reade, Stevenson and Robert Browning. Also some of my illustrators are fairly complete especially Rowlandson. 17

His nomination to the Grolier Club, and the making of his will, coincided with Harry’s intention to compile a catalog of his collection. His first inclination was to ask his friend the learned Dr. Rosenbach to help him, and he asked the advice of the most respected American collector of his day, Beverly Chew. This was Chew’s reply:

The making of a catalogue of books is a very laudable work, and I congratulate you on your intention. I know of several people who are thoroughly competent to make collations of your books, but at present all of them are in positions which would not warrant their taking up your work. I should think Dr. Rosenbach could be relied upon to make your collations. . . . The collections of Huth, Corser, Hazlitt, and the volumes published by the Grolier Club, contain about everything of value . . . and if the Doctor will be careful to verify his collations by these works, he is hardly likely to go astray. 18

Hardly a ringing endorsement, and, had he known, a severe blow to Rosenbach’s pride. However, Harry did ask the Doctor to collaborate, and the catalog was published in 1910. Harry thanked Rosenbach in the preface as having been “more than helpful in collating all the early books and aiding me in every possible way.” 19 But his debt to his family was deeper than his debt to his friend, and Harry acknowledged their support and financial assistance: “My deepest thanks are due to my grandfather and my parents, without whose interest and kindness I could not have had many of the books described.”

It was while working with Dr. Rosenbach on this catalog in December 1909 that Harry made his biggest purchase yet from Rosenbach, the Countess of Pembroke’s own copy of Aracnea, the poem written for her by her brother, Sir Philip Sidney. When the book had passed through Dr. Rosenbach’s hands four years earlier, Harry coveted it, but, at $2,200, it was beyond his reach. Now, Rosenbach had it in stock again. The price had doubled—Rosenbach priced it at $4,400—but no collector will pass up a second time a book that he had wanted and lost, particularly when he is in the process of publishing a catalog. It went into Harry’s collection; he considered it his most important book. 20 And, as always, Dr. Rosenbach had the perfect complementary book for Harry’s mother to give him that Christmas: Sir Philip Sidney’s copy of Francesco Guicciardini’s La historia d’Italia (1569), believed to be the only book from Sidney’s library to survive. Mrs. Widener supplemented this by picking out eight presentation Dickenses and an illuminated copy of the Magna Charta printed on vellum for George IV.

17 Harry Widener to George Kutz, 1 October 1909. UA.
18 This letter was written only five days after Harry signed his will, taking care of the future of his collection.
19 The manuscript of the 1910 catalog is in the Rosenbach Museum & Library, AA6 1270/9.
20 Harry Widener to Luther Livingston, 12 June 1911. WC.
21 Beverly Chew to Harry Widener, 14 December 1909. UA.
Rosenbach saw to it that Harry’s catalog was sent to every important book collector and library. It was a public announcement that a collector of importance had emerged. The volume was suitably sumptuous: a large quarto, published in an edition of 100 copies on Whatman paper with uncut edges, and two copies on vellum, all embellished with numerous facsimiles of the highest quality. It introduced Harry to a number of collectors and bibliophiles who had had no idea of the young Philadelphian’s interest in books. For example, the quality of the production impressed Henry E. Huntington, who was to be Harry’s major competitor at the Hoe Sale, “It is a very excellent catalogue and if I am fortunate enough to have at good a one of my own library I shall certainly have reason to congratulate myself!”, and Edmund Gosse, focusing on the quality of the material there described, wrote: “Your catalogue is one of the finest existing, and I can but warmly congratulate you on the possession of so superb a house of books.”

61 Henry E. Huntington to Harry Widener, 15 May 1902; and Edmund Gosse to Harry Widener, 23 March 1902.
Of course copies also went to Harry’s alma mater. However, Archibald Cary Coolidge, Librarian of Harvard, did not pay close attention to this gift, for he wrote:

Dear Widener, I have received with much pleasure the copy of the catalogue of your father’s library. . . . [It] is certainly a very well got up one and the library, of course, superb.

It was an unfortunate faux pas. Harry seems to have written to Coolidge, gently disabusing him of his mistaken assumption, for Coolidge writes again:

I do not know who it was misinformed me as to the ownership of your library though I know, of course, that you were the one who had the care of it. All I can say is that you are even more to be congratulated than I had thought. I shall remember your invitation for I should greatly like to see your books some day. Don’t forget to look in on me when you are in Cambridge."}

24 Archibald Cary Coolidge to Harry Widener, 18 May 1911 and undated. WC.
Fortunately for Harvard, President Lowell exercised greater diplomacy, and took the time to visit Harry in Philadelphia:

Thank you very much for the truly magnificent catalogue of your library. It shows what can be done in printing and paper today.

I hope you will accept from me a modest copy of my Government of England in memory of the time when I first knew you as a student.

I enjoyed immensely the hour I spent at your house. I only wish I could have been there much longer. I want to come again so as to fix the picture in my mind, for I cannot get things in my head as quickly as when I was younger.33

Given later developments, one can only wonder if Harry’s mother knew of Coolidge’s mistake?

The purchase of Sidney’s Aradia signals a shift in the Widener purchasing pattern. Harry’s earlier purchases were all moderately priced; the expensive ones were gifts from his mother. But now Harry’s limits expanded, the Aradia being a case in point, and Mrs. Widener began to limit herself to a regular Christmas purchase of books and manuscripts totalling some $10,000. For example, in January 1910; shortly after celebrating his twenty-fifth birthday, Harry spent $16,000 at Rosenbach’s for a lot of eleven items that covered the range of his collecting tastes, including Dickens’s own copy of Sketches by Beaz with original sketches by Cruikshank; eighteen pages of Thackeray’s manuscript of Pendennis with the author’s signature; a copy bound for Charles II of Charles F’s Eikon Baethke (1649); and first editions of Paradise Lost (1667) and The Faerie Queene (1590–99). The outlines of his collecting criteria are reflected in this purchase and is in his 1910 catalog: not only first editions, but the first issue of the first edition, in original condition, and with a dedication, or at least a presentation, inscription; sometimes supplemented with the original contract, correspondence with the publisher, or drawings. It is the type of all-embracing collecting to which every collector aspires; Harry Widener was fortunate in now having the means carry it out.

Just as 1909–10 was a turning point in Harry Widener’s collecting, that same period saw the birth of one of Dr. Rosenbach’s most famous traits. His prices became much more adventurous. In the early days of the Rosenbach Company, the Doctor tended to buy from other dealers and sell at a ten per cent markup. However, his sales experiences with the Widener family, Mrs. Widener in particular, made Dr. Rosenbach realize that when a collector really wants something, the price he or she is willing to pay may bear no relationship to what Dr. Rosenbach had paid for it originally. In other words, the only two things that mattered were what the buyer could pay for it, and what he or she would pay for it.

Harry Widener’s purchases in 1910 provide clear examples of this new Rosenbach pricing philosophy. Harry bought a fine edition of Robinson Crusoe for $5,000; the Doctor had purchased it from Maggs, the London bookseller, for £200 ($900). A presentation Pilkington was sold to Harry for $1,650; it had cost £160 ($720).34 Dr. Rosenbach had gone from a markup of ten per cent to one of one hundred per cent, or more. But he judged his customers well. Harry Widener did buy from other dealers. By this time he was experienced enough to know what the prices should be, and he was always careful with his money. The reason he bought most often from Rosenbach was that the Doctor always seemed to have not only

33 A. Lawrence Lowell to Harry Widener, 20 March 1910
34 In September 1910, the exchange rate was approximately £1 = $4.60.
the right book, but the right copy of a book—a presentation copy or in a special binding—and that was worth the Doctor's price.

The Rosenbach brothers, Dr. Rosenbach in particular, had become indispensable to the Wideneres by 1910. There are frequent references in Dr. Rosenbach's letters to Harry dropping by for lunch. Philip Rosenbach, on his twice-yearly trips to Europe, was kept busy looking for appropriate gilt frames for P. A. B. and Joseph Widener's paintings. Rosenbach workmen were dispatched to Lynnewood Hall to repair furniture, hang pictures, regild frames, and measure for new draperies. And Harry and his mother were not the only Wideners buying books and manuscripts from the Doctor, for P. A. B. in the spring of 1910 bought two books of hours and a magnificent fifteenth-century manuscript of Jehan Bruyant's *Le livre du chastel de labour* with forty-six half-page miniatures. The three manuscripts cost $25,000; it was Rosenbach's largest single sale to date. The Widener family's business was indispensable to the financial success of the Rosenbach Company. In 1910 almost a quarter of the Company's gross sales, $56,000 of $238,000, were sales made to the Wideneres.

In the spring of 1911 it was announced that the library of American collector Robert Hoe would be auctioned, an event that would make book history and help to set Dr. Rosenbach on his path to bookselling fame. The library was one of the greatest collections of books in the United States, rich in early manuscripts, printed books, and fine bindings, and it was to be the most important sale ever held in this country. The books were just the type for Harry Widener's growing collection, and he (and Rosenbach) hoped to be major buyers in the sale.

Alas for Harry, it was not to be. It was at the Hoe sale that California millionaire Henry E. Huntington emerged as an irresistible collecting force, sweeping all before him. Huntington bought the crown jewel of the collection, a copy of the Gutenberg Bible on vellum, for a record price of $50,000; Harry's grandfather, P. A. B. Widener, was the underbidder. And so it went, with Huntington persistently out-bidding the Wideneres on everything they wanted. The only silver lining—for Rosenbach—was that although he only managed to spend some $11,000 at the sale, his name was mentioned frequently in the newspaper accounts as the persistent underbidder. This was valuable publicity, and it paid off in the weeks that followed when Huntington made his first Rosenbach purchase, the first step in a relationship Rosenbach would later find extremely profitable.

Harry Widener was not only disappointed in not getting the books he wanted, he was appalled at the prices: "Are these awful prices going to keep up?"28 he complained to Luther Livingston. Four days later, he spent the money he had set aside for purchases at the Hoe sale at Rosenbach's, paying $25,000 on *The Royal Book* (1484), printed by William Caxton, some drawings for *Pickwick*, and Dickens's contract for the same. It was one of Harry's largest purchases on his own; it was destined to be his last major one from Rosenbach.

At the second Hoe sale in January 1912, Harry fared somewhat better than at the first. As he remarked to Luther Livingston: "Indeed the only very high books were such in English Literature as Mr. Huntington did not happen to possess. On all such he was apparently unlimited and it made me very angry at not being able to buy the 'Dunciad' and two of the Middletons. Still I had the small satisfaction of making him pay for them."29

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27 P. A. B. Widener's illuminated manuscripts were inherited by his son Joseph (see note 3).
28 Harry Widener to Luther Livingston, 13 June 1911. WC.
29 Harry Widener to Luther Livingston, 21 January 1912. WC.
There was also a second copy of the Gutenberg Bible in this sale, and P. A. B. Widener still wanted one. On this occasion Dr. Rosenbach told the Widener that he thought they would have a better chance of getting it if the bid was entrusted to Quaritch. As in the case of the first folio, the maneuver was successful. Quaritch bought the Bible for $27,500 and turned over a quarter of his commission to Rosenbach for his services as intermediary.10 It was the first of five Gutenberg Bibles that Rosenbach helped his clients obtain over the course of his long career. It was not immediately announced that Mr. Widener was the successful bidder, and Harry wrote excitedly to Luther Livingston: “Now I will tell you a secret only you must tell no one until it is out—Grandfather has bought the Hoe copy of the Massin Bible. Is it not great! I wish it was for me but it is not.”11

A loyal Harvard alumnus, Harry Widener continued to be interested in the College, and particularly in the library. The College Library in Gore Hall was badly overcrowded, and Harvard had been seeking a benefactor to build a new library for several years. In the spring of 1912, Widener discussed with a friend how he could help raise the money for a new library.12 Nothing was to be done quickly, however, and on 13 March Harry sailed for Europe on the Mont Blanc with his parents. George and Harry were deputized by P. A. B. to look at some paintings he thought of acquiring, and Mrs. Widener was to make some purchases for her daughter Eleanor’s treasurer. Harry Widener left his bids for the final Hoe sale with Rosenbach, for it was scheduled to begin on 15 April, when Harry would be on route from England on board the Titanic.

While in London, Harry viewed the books for the upcoming Henry Harle sale, Part 2, and made some purchases in the shops. He bought nine books from Quaritch, including the Latin copy of the 1508 edition of Bacon’s Essays, on 1 April 1912. The Bacon he took with him, the other eight were to be shipped. A few days later, he was back at Quaritch and bought a set of Gibbon’s Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. Just before catching the train to board the Titanic, he stopped in at J. Pearson and Co. and purchased a small, four-leaf pamphlet entitled Harp News of an honorably exhumed which was in the City of Sebastopol (1548).13 This too he took with him.

11 10 March 1912, WC. The Bible was promised to the Harry Elkins Widener Collection in 1904 by Harry’s brother and sister, George B. Widener Jr. and Eleanor Widener Bacon.
13 This account of Harry Widener’s last trip to London is taken from Freeman, “Harry Widener’s Last Books.”
14 In 1938, London bookseller G. W. Michelmore wrote to the Librarian of Harvard offering a book for sale, with a story behind it. He recalled that “on the evening of the day upon which the Titanic sailed on her first and last voyage, young Harry Widener called at Messrs. J. Pearson . . . , and purchased a very desirable volume . . . [which] was Chief Assistant 113, Pearson & Co., at the time and interviewed Young Widener. After the purchase of the above volume which he put in his pocket, Mr. Widener asked how long it would take him to get to Eastern Railway Station, for his train to Liverpool to catch the boat.” (quotation from William A. Jackson, “Notes,” Harvard Library Bulletin 5 (1939), 246-250). The Titanic sailed from Southampton, and Harry would therefore have been heading to Warrington to catch the train, so his story may not be wholly reliable. Freeman also points out that the train 10 Southampton left Warrington at 12.32 a.m., a bit early for Widener to do any last-minute shopping.

The book was a small, four-leaf pamphlet, then believed to be the only copy known, and (if the story is true) it is easy to believe that Harry took his two rarest purchases, the Bacon and this exhumed pamphlet, in his own luggage on the Titanic. As these particular copies of these two books have never again come on the market, they may indeed now rest at the bottom of the Atlantic. Harry’s brother George gave a copy of this pamphlet to the Widener Collection in 1910, as an anonymous friend presented the latter’s motorized copy of the 1598 Bacon to Harvard in 1928.
The _Titanic_ left Southampton on 10 April 1912 on its maiden voyage to New York. Five days later it crashed into an iceberg in the north Atlantic; more than 1,500 lives were lost. The Boston _Herald_ on 24 April reported Mrs. Widener's account of the disaster:

Mr. Widener and I had retired to our cabin for the night . . . when the shock of crashing into the iceberg occurred. We thought little of it, and did not leave our cabin. We must have remained there an hour before becoming fearful. Then Mr. Widener went to our son Harry's room and brought him to our cabin. A short time later Harry went to the deck and hurried back and told us that we must go on deck. Mr. Widener and Harry a few minutes later went on deck and aided the officers who were then having trouble with those in the steerage. That was the last I saw of my husband or son.

I went on deck and was put into a life boat [with my maid]. As the boat pulled away from the _Titanic_ I saw one of the officers shoot himself in the head and a few minutes later saw Capt. Smith jump from the bridge into the sea.

News of the wreck of the _Titanic_ reached New York the morning of 15 April, the first day of the third of the Hoe sales. Rosenbach bid for Harry, even after it seemed certain that Harry was lost. In Philadelphia, news of the disaster caused press hysteria. Reporters besieged the Widener offices in Philadelphia, reporting each movement and reaction of P. A. B. Widener as he frantically sought news of the survivors picked up by the _Carpathia_. On 16 April he heard, and told the Rosenbachs, that Mrs. Widener and her maid were safe but that there was no news of Harry or George. Then, on 22 April, came word that George Widener’s body had been recovered. P. A. B. dispatched his yacht to Halifax, Nova Scotia, to collect the body and return it to Philadelphia. Harry’s body was never found. He was twenty-seven years old at the time of his death.

Much has been written about Harry Widener's "last book." The story has become one of the most famous of twentieth-century book folktales. Fellow Philadelphian A. Edward Newton, chronicler of the “Golden Age” of American
book collecting, devoted a chapter in his book *The Amusements of Book Collecting*, published six years after Harry's death, to what he called "in all the history of book-collecting . . . the most touching story." In his account, Harry Widener's last purchase in London was the 1598 Bacon, and Harry precipitously and eminently remarked to Quainch, "I think I'll take that little Bacon with me in my pocket, and if I am shipwrecked it will go with me." It is certain from Quainch's records that the Bacon was not the last book Harry bought; but did he indeed foreshadow his own death?

The account written by Rosenbach in his memoir of Harry, published with the catalog of Harry's Stevenson collection in 1913, is perhaps the closest one can come to the truth. This is Dr. Rosenbach's account of what he called the "most touching, most pathetic, withal the most glorious incident in the romance of book-collecting":

He had purchased from Mr. Quainch the rare second edition of Bacon's *Essay* (1598), of which only a few copies are extant. He said he would take it with him, as he did not want to trust it with the other volumes that he had bought. He would keep it in his dispatch box, with which he always traveled. Just before the "Titanic" sank he said to his mother, "Mother, I have placed the volume in my pocket, little 'Bacon' goes with me!" This is surely the finest anecdote in the whole history of books.

Although Dr. Rosenbach's stories do not always stand up to close examination, this one does. Here, Harry is not morbidly anticipating his own watery death. Rather, if he is saved, this rare and precious book will be saved too, instead of lost with his luggage. Nor does it seem likely that Dr. Rosenbach would have put into print a story about Mrs. Widener's last moments with her son unless the account had come from her and had her approval.

When Rosenbach returned from the Hoe sales in New York, he went immediately to Lynnewood Hall to see Mrs. Widener. In the first few months of Eleanor Elkins Widener's grief, she relied heavily on him. He was at Lynnewood Hall almost every day. He answered letters of sympathy for her, talked to her about Harry, and entered into her plans to memorialize her lost son. He even advised her on the selection of altar cloth for the church in Cheltenham that the Widener and Elkins families were considering as a memorial.

In Harry's will, his collection was left to his mother, with the request that it be given to Harvard when suitable accommodation could be found for it. There was great excitement at Harvard when this news was heard, for the University had been trying for some time to build a new library building to replace the inadequate facilities in Gore Hall. The University hoped that the Widener family would do something substantial.

As the weeks passed, Eleanor Elkins Widener's course of action clarified. There were two things that needed to be done for Harry. The first was to make his collection what it would have become had he lived to continue with it. This purpose she would entrust to Dr. Rosenbach. Second, a building needed to be provided for it. It was to this that she now turned her attention.

One of her advisors in the matter was Harry's friend, Philadelphia neighbor, fellow book collector, and Harvard alumnus, John B. Stetson, Jr. (A.B. 1906), who played the role of liaison between Mrs. Widener and the Harvard administration.

Several different plans were under consideration: a separate building to house
Harry's collection, a wing to be added to the present library building, or, at a cost
estimated to be $2 million, a new library for Harvard that would also house Harry's
collection. In July 1912, leaning towards the last of these alternatives, Mrs. Widener
sent her architect, Horace Trumbauer, who had built both the Elkins and Widener
mansions in Philadelphia, to Cambridge to look at possible sites for a memorial. By
August, she decided that providing Harvard with a new College Library would
serve as the right memorial for Harry. In a letter to President Lowell, she stated
firmly: "The only thing I . . . want emphasized is, that the library is a memorial to
my dear son & to be known as the 'Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library' &
given by me & not his Grandfather. . . ."

That Mrs. Widener felt particularly strongly about the part the Elkins money
played in her memorial gift is borne out by a letter from her second husband,
Alexander Hamilton Rice, who wrote to President Lowell on 10 December 1927:
"Will you do your best to see that in all official reports, etc., the Library is referred
to as the Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library?—Widener! Not one cent of
Widener money, one second of Widener thought, nor one ounce of Widener
energy were expended on either the conception or the construction of the Library."
It seems likely that Dr. Rice is stretching the point a bit. P. A. B. and Joseph
Widener probably would have been involved had Eleanor Elkins Widener allowed
it. But this was what she was to do for Harry, and she did not want to share it.

Under the terms of the agreement signed by Mrs. Widener and Harvard on 31
December 1912, she stipulated that Harry's collection was to be kept separate.
There was to be at all times a special curator for the Memorial Library, and a sum
of $150,000 was put in trust to fund the salary of the curator and to maintain the
books and the rooms. Mrs. Widener also had the right to nominate the curator. For
its part, Harvard agreed that it would not permit any structures of any kind to be
erected in the courts around the building, and that the exterior and the Memorial
Rooms would not be altered.35

In his parallel course, Dr. Rosenbach tended to the growth of Harry's collection.
Seven weeks after the wreck of the Titanic, the second Huth sale began. Eleanor
Elkins Widener instructed Dr. Rosenbach to see that all Harry's commissions, left
with Quaritch before his departure, were acted upon, and every volume secured.
As books arrived that Harry had purchased before leaving London, Rosenbach saw
that the volumes were as they should be and arranged for the bills to be paid.
Rosenbach also pulled out of the files the desiderata list Harry had made in 1908,
and put it in an envelope labelled: "List of books reserved for Mrs. George D.
Widener."

By the end of the first week of July, Mrs. Widener had spent more than $120,000
adding to Harry's collection. She bought along the lines Harry had collected: more
Dickens, Cruikshank drawings, Thackeray, Blake's Songs of Innocence and of
Experience, Chapman's Homer, Pope's correspondence with his legal advisor, and
a group of presentation copies of books by American authors including Longfellow,
Emerson, Hawthorne, and Poe, which Rosenbach had assembled over the last few
years. P. A. B. Widener contributed by ordering the manuscript of Tennyson's
"Charge of the Light Brigade" and several Burns manuscripts. As Mrs. Widener

35 Mrs. Widener's attorney in the negotiations, Ellis Ames
Ballard, was himself a noted collector of material by and
about Rudyard Kipling, and he had helped Harry with
wrote to a friend in August 1912, "[Dr. Rosenbach and Harry] always talked every-
thing over together." Now that Harry was gone, she talked everything over with
Dr. Rosenbach.

The Rosenbach book stock was being depleted rapidly by the Wideners, and Dr.
Rosenbach wrote to his brother Philip, in London on his twice-yearly buying trip,
to buy. The only problem, as far as the Rosenbachs were concerned, was the
Wideners' slowness in paying their accounts. The Doctor wrote to Philip:

I expect a little money, maybe $15,000, from Mrs. Widener sometime in
October. To date, we have sold her over $300,000 worth of stuff and Thomas
[e.g., the George C. Thomas collection, which Rosenbach had on consignment]. I
think she will take the whole lot, but do not wish to make any promises. It is
very hard work out there three and four times a week, writing and cataloguing
continually... [Ship immediately the stuff purchased by you, as I want mate-
rial to show Mr. A. B. Widener especially early in August, as Mrs. Widener
has taken a house at Newport for the balance of the summer, and it will be a
splendid opportunity to interest the old gentleman."

Dr. Rosenbach never supposed his business instinct.

In her grief, Mrs. Widener seems to have closed her own to all booksellers but
Rosenbach. At the same time she was buying thousands of dollars worth of books
from Dr. Rosenbach, she wrote to Luther Livingston, another bookseller who had
been a good friend of Harry: "At the present time I will not make any additions to
Harry's library. I have added very largely to it since Harry was lost—and now I feel
I must rest for a while—later on I may talk business." 34

In December 1912, Mrs. Widener made her annual Christmas pilgrimage to the
Rosenbach store. She bought for Harry six rare Shelleys, including the poignant
Adenae. That Christmas she wrote to Philip Rosenbach: "Dr. Rosenbach knew
[Harry] more intimately [than anyone] and had a knowledge of his tastes. I must
also thank you for the Xmas present you sent him. All of his books were put in his
room the same as last year, [and although] we could not see him, I know he was
with us." 35

One of the tasks Eleanor Widener had set Dr. Rosenbach was the writing of the
Rosenbach catalog. She wanted a complete catalog of the library, with individual
volumes for the three largest collections—Robert Louis Stevenson, the
Cruikshanks, and Charles Dickens—and a two-volume catalog for everything else.
Rosenbach worked at Wynnewood Hall almost every day, collating books, writing
descriptions, and generally making himself indispensable. The Wideners regarded
him as their personal librarian and curator, and Joseph Widener asked Rosenbach
to work also on the catalog of the Rosenbach paintings. A letter written by Dr.
Rosenbach in March 1913 to P. A. B. Widener and (Joseph's son), enrolled in St.
Marks School in Southborough, Massachusetts, captures some of the flavor of the
relationship:

Dear Mr. Widener,

Your father, this morning, informed me that you were writing an essay on
The Renaissance and Recall, and requested me to secure for you some books
that would give a little light on this subject.

37 Eleanor Ellen Widener to Luther Livingston, 3 August
1912, RG 407, box 9.
38 A. S. W. Rosenbach to Philip H. Rosenbach, 21 July
1912, RCA IIA 12.
39 Eleanor Ellen Widener to Philip H. Rosenbach,
[December 1912], RCA IIA 12.

Harvard University - Houghton Library / 1000879.xml_7569058858
We are sending you two books... I am sorry I could not send you a book which treats the subject in a simpler way, as it will be no fun going over such exhaustive studies. After you have inspected them, should you desire any information, do not hesitate to let me know, and I shall be pleased to answer as fully as I can.

Wishing you good luck with your paper, and with kind personal regards...

ASWR.

P.S. If at any time I can be of any service to you kindly let me know, and I shall be very glad to assist you. 60

It was never too early to start cultivating the next generation of Widener collectors.

In June of 1913, Dr. Rosenbach wrote an account of the laying of the cornerstone of the Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library to his brother Philip:

I went to Boston, arrived Sunday, spending the day at Marblehead, and attended the exercises at Harvard on Monday. It was extremely hot, and we had to stand in the sun with our hats off with the temperature at 120 degrees. It was interesting, however, and I’m glad I went.

I cabled you yesterday that Mr. [P. A. B.] Widener had authorized me to give £2000 for the Vailima and Pacific letters of Robert Louis Stevenson as per Sir Sydney Colvin’s cablegram to you. He will only allow us 10% [commission] on the pounds, we to pay all expenses such as insurance, etc. He claims that on account of his many Real Estate deals, he will not have the money for two months, so he will give us the money to cable to you in two months from June 19th. Of course, if you can buy them cheaper, say 10%, it would give us a larger profit, although under the circumstances it may not be wise to do so. You were particularly anxious to make the sale and I had great difficulty in persuading Mr. Widener to consent to purchase the letters. The stock market, as you know, is in very bad condition. However, they will be a wonderful thing and will make the Stevenson catalogue of paramount importance, as well as a great advertising scheme. 61

By Christmas 1913, the Stevenson catalog was finished. At Mrs. Widener’s direction, the Rosenbach Company sent copies to family, friends, libraries, and collectors. As a token of her appreciation, Mrs. Widener presented Dr. Rosenbach with a new Brewster-Hotchkiss chauffeur-driven limousine. Rosenbach, somewhat embarrassed, told her that he could not afford to run such a car, so it was exchanged for a platinum watch encircled with diamonds. 62

During 1914, Mrs. Widener increasingly devoted her attention to the building of the Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library, and the pace of her purchases from Rosenbach diminished. But she continued to consult him about the library frequently, and the depth of her attachment is expressed in a letter she wrote to him in July 1914:

When the Library is finished I want all the books installed there. Then I will feel happiness and know I have done as my dear boy wished. Over two years have gone since I lost him, and I am no more reconciled than I was at first, and never will be again. All joy of living left me on April 15, 1912. Forgive me for writing you like this but you loved Harry, and can understand my sorrow. 63

On 24 June 1915, the dedication of the library finally took place. The exact cost of the library is not known. Archibald Cary Coolidge, Director of the Library, told

62 Wolf and Fleming. Rosenbach. 84.
the librarian of Yale that it was closer to $3 million than to $2 million, and it has been estimated that Mrs. Widner's total bequest to Harvard over the years was more than $4 million. In October, five months after the Widner Library opened, Eleanor Elkins Widner married Alexander Hamilton Rice (A.B. 1896, M.D. 1904). Although Mrs. Widner had accomplished her two objectives, completing Harry's library and seeing it properly housed at Harvard, her sense of loss was never completely assuaged. Years later she wrote to Flora Livingston, the first curator of the Widner Memorial Room, "I cannot stay long away from the library—I feel nearer my boy when I am there.""

61 Eleanor Elkins Widner Rice to Flora Livingston, Jr.
December 1915 (WC).
Dr. Rosenbach worked for several more years on compiling catalogs of Harry’s collection. Dated 1918, although not distributed until the fall of 1919, the publication of the catalogs of Harry’s Dickens, Cruikshank, and “general” rare collections finally marked “closed” to an important chapter in Dr. Rosenbach’s life. His friendship with Harry Widener was close. They spent much time together talking of literature and of books, they worked closely together compiling Harry’s 1910 catalog and his edition of Robert Louis Stevenson’s Memoirs of Himself (1912), and when Harry was abroad he wrote Dr. Rosenbach often to tell him of where he had been. In later life, when Rosenbach had become the world’s most famous bookseller, he had other, better, customers. But they rarely became close friends. Moreover, the Widener family, through their purchases, put the struggling Rosenbach Company on a solid financial footing. Without the Wideners, it is not clear that Dr. Rosenbach would have had his later successes.

And what can one say of Harry Widener as a collector? When a man dies young, and in a tragic accident, it is difficult to separate romance from reality. Clearly he loved his books and the book-collecting game. He wrote of the books he bought in the Huth Sale: “The more I see of them the more lovely they look. Indeed I grow fonder of them every day.” His enthusiasm and growing bibliographical knowledge impressed the older, more experienced collectors who met him. William A. White wrote to Mrs. Widener after Harry’s death, “I have never met a young man who on so short an acquaintance made so charming an impression, and aside from his delightful personality, he showed a remarkable literary instinct for picking out the really interesting and important things among the books he was looking at.”

It was perhaps this enthusiasm and charm, more than his still-developing skill as a collector, which made Harry Widener’s death so tragic to his book-collecting contemporaries. Dr. Rosenbach said in his memoir of Harry: “Mr. Widener had many lovable qualities, and every one who met him liked him. He was manly, brave, outspoken; with all the fire and enthusiasm of youth he combined the courtesy and restraint of a gentleman,” and Edmund Gosse wrote to Harry’s mother that he “was drawn very tenderly out to him by his sweet exuberance of zeal, his cordiality, his thrilling charm.” One might be inclined to discount opinions written to a grieving mother—although the many collectors who wrote to Eleanor Widener after Harry’s death did not need to do so—but there are similar assessments in letters not to Mrs. Widener. Sir Sidney Colvin wrote to Stevenson bibliographer Colonel W. F. Prideaux a month after the Titanic disaster:

I was glad to see that you sent to the Pall Mall a little memorial note on poor young Harry Widener. He had made a curious and a very pleasant impression on my wife and me when he came to see us last year: I say curious, because one seemed to see visible in his features the hereditary [a]uteness of a money-making and rather low-bred stock at issue, or at any rate in imperfect combination, with an amiable character and a very genuine love of letters.

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40 Harry Elkins Widener to Luther Livingston, 31 December 1911. WC.
41 William A. White to Eleanor Elkins Widener, 16 March 1914. WC.
43 Edmund Gosse to Eleanor Elkins Widener, 26 February 1914. WC.
44 Sir Sidney Colvin to Colonel W. F. Prideaux, 17 May 1912. UA.
The second letter is from the bookseller Bernard Alfred Quaritch:

Young Widener was . . . a very enthusiastic book-collector, with his wealth had he lived he would no doubt have gathered one of the most remarkable libraries in America. He was a most amiable young man & greatly liked by everyone who came into contact with him. Absolutely devoid of side and affectation."

Perhaps the eloquent remarks of Senator Lodge at the dedication of the Henry Elisha Widener Memorial Library form the most fitting assessment of Harry Widener's collecting legacy:

This noble gift to learning comes to us with the shadow of a great sorrow resting upon it . . . . But with the march of the years, which have devoured past generations, and to which we too shall succumb, the shadow of grief will pass, while the great memorial will remain. It is a monument to a lover of books, and in what more gracious guise than this can a man's memory go down to a remote posterity? He is the benefactor and the exemplar of a great host, for within that ample phrase all gather who have deep in their hearts the abiding love of books and literature."

80 Bernard Alfred Quaritch to A. C. R. Carter, June 1892. 81 Benton-Smith, "Building a Great Library," 97.