



"Section 2: The Harvard University Library's collections" in "Preserving Harvard's retrospective collections"

Citation

Allman, Miriam H., et al. 1991. "Section 2: The Harvard University Library's collections" in "Preserving Harvard's retrospective collections". Harvard Library Bulletin 2 (2), Summer 1991: 12-17.

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Section Two

The Harvard University Library's Collections

The Harvard University Library has a particular responsibility to meet the preservation challenge brought about by the use since 1840 of paper subject to rapid deterioration, for it is one of the few great international libraries. Along with the British Library, the Library of Congress, the Bibliothèque Nationale, and the New York Public Library, the strength of Harvard's collections on particular areas sometimes exceeds that of libraries in the countries of origin. Moreover, among the collections are large quantities of unique materials, both printed books and manuscripts.

That characterization fits every large Harvard library. The Andover-Harvard Theological Library has particularly strong holdings on Protestantism and may be unexcelled in its coverage of some aspects, such as Unitarianism, both here and elsewhere, including Unitarianism in Hungary. Its letterbooks of the Unitarian-Universalist Association are unique. Baker Library of the Harvard Business School, along with an unsurpassed collection of pre-1850 economic literature (the Kress Library) has a large quantity of records of firms in New England, where the Industrial Revolution initially occurred in this country, along with such heavily used material as the Dun & Bradstreet credit ledgers; in post-1850 printed books it has unique holdings of what university libraries have generally considered to be unscholarly materials, items such as trade journals.

The Gutman Library of the Graduate School of Education has an ever-growing collection of American textbooks, and the Countway Library of Medicine, along with exceedingly strong holdings of early printed books, has collected the records of a number of medical institutions, some of them of international prominence.

The Loeb Library of the Graduate School of Design, along with special strength in landscape architecture and in its vertical files of ephemeral material, has such special material as the scrapbooks of H. H. Richardson, and a special collection on the Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne.

The Law Library's holdings of English law are so strong that a catalog would constitute a virtual bibliography of the subject, and the same is very nearly true for country after country. Shelf after shelf, range after range of separate documents—the kind of material that one tends to use by flipping through it—highlight one of the problems that scholars will face if the material is no longer available for scanning in the original.

Like the Law Library, the College Library can appear to be encyclopedic, even though that is not so. It, together with other libraries of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, consists of more than sixty libraries. These include Widener, Pusey, Houghton, Lamont, Hilles, Cabot Science, Fine Arts, Littauer, Music, Tozzer,

Kummel Library of the Geological Sciences, and a number of other science libraries, but despite the size and variety of these libraries, some subject areas or genres are not covered. Some, in fact, are not covered in research depth anywhere in the library system. The Harvard Library does not, for instance, have research collections on all parts of Africa or of Asia; children's books are not generally collected; and much current agricultural and engineering literature is passed over.

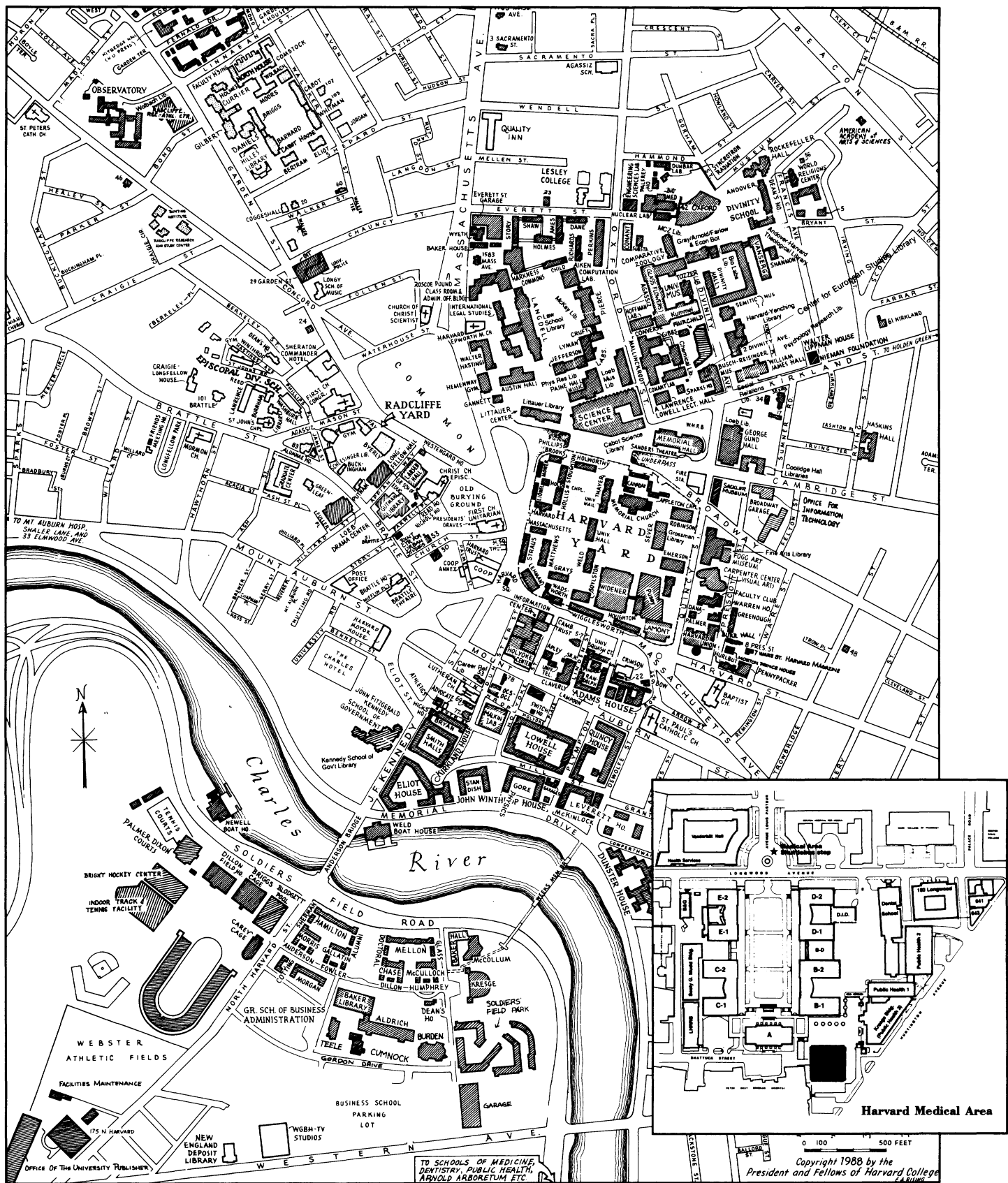
Both our strengths and our relative weaknesses result from some policy decisions about coverage. Perhaps even more, though, do they stem from the ways in which the library grew in the era before collection development policies and professional book selectors.

Whereas today the Harvard Library grows mainly by the accretion of title after title, each purchased separately (blanket plans have not been common at Harvard), that pattern has become dominant only since World War II. For most of the library's history, growth came much more from gifts or bequests. In the eighteenth century gifts were so important that the first library catalog in British North America, the Harvard Library catalog of 1723, was published in order to inform donors of the library's holdings, the aim being to stimulate them to make gifts. In the early decades of the nineteenth century lack of funds for purchases stimulated the college to send out to authors a printed form letter requesting copies of their books. Not until the Subscribed Fund of 1842 was there a successful effort to acquire substantial funds for purchases; it was mainly used to fill gaps.

The present pattern in which growth of holdings comes mainly from purchasing current materials did not even begin until 1859. In that year a Harvard alumnus William Gray promised \$5,000 a year for five years, with the provision that the funds be spent on current publications. Those funds ran out, and in 1869-70 the number of volumes purchased was a tiny 197; in 1876-77 it was only 2,894. Even with the jump to 5,566 purchases in 1877-78, the library was acquiring only a small percentage of the output of the organized booktrade in the United States and Europe.

Although gifts were crucial to growth throughout most of the nineteenth century, they tended to be not so much of large collections as of an item or an armful. This changed from the early 1890s. The reason was the involvement of Archibald Cary Coolidge, professor of history and, from 1910 to 1928, director of the library. He or his friends bought collections that they presented as gifts. He used library funds to purchase collections. And, his friends also gave significant groups of material that they themselves had brought together as collections—Turkey, the Crusades, the Latin East, Slovak literature, the history of the Slavic countries, the Italian Risorgimento, Icelandic history and literature, Portuguese literature, English local history, the theatre, British and American political pamphlets, the French Revolution, cooking, Pope, Gay, Ronsard, Latin America, the American West, etc., etc.

What was true for the central collections also characterizes special and faculty libraries that were being formed in medicine and law, in the sciences, and, in the twentieth century, in the other faculties. These other parts of the library system created further pockets of specialized strength, albeit some of them very large, indeed. The formation of specialized strengths continued in the 1930s and, especially, during and after World War II, a time when prominent New England families often emptied attics and studies of personal papers that William A. Jackson collected assiduously in the Houghton Library.



Harvard University Library's collections are decentralized, providing ease of access for specialized users and space for growth.

The Library thus went far beyond what was necessary for instruction, even instruction that included the writing of research papers by students. Along with the core or central materials—the books of university presses and the major trade publishers, the series of learned societies and scientific institutions—the library acquired the ephemeral, primary sources that, perhaps unused and uncited by scholars, may sit for decades awaiting an investigator.

The Library also went far beyond what was needed by institutions with an Anglo-American orientation, albeit somewhat broadened by the literatures and histories of ancient Greece and Rome plus the major European countries. Our very classification system fostered breadth, for it was not so much subject oriented as geographically oriented; one could readily see whether an area of the world was being neglected. Three major ones came to be covered by special libraries or departments: Harvard-Yenching (East Asia), the Middle East Department in Widener, and the Judaica Department in Widener.

The statistics below show the magnitude of the growth brought about by the acquisition of collections—and the dimensions of the preservation challenge—at Harvard:

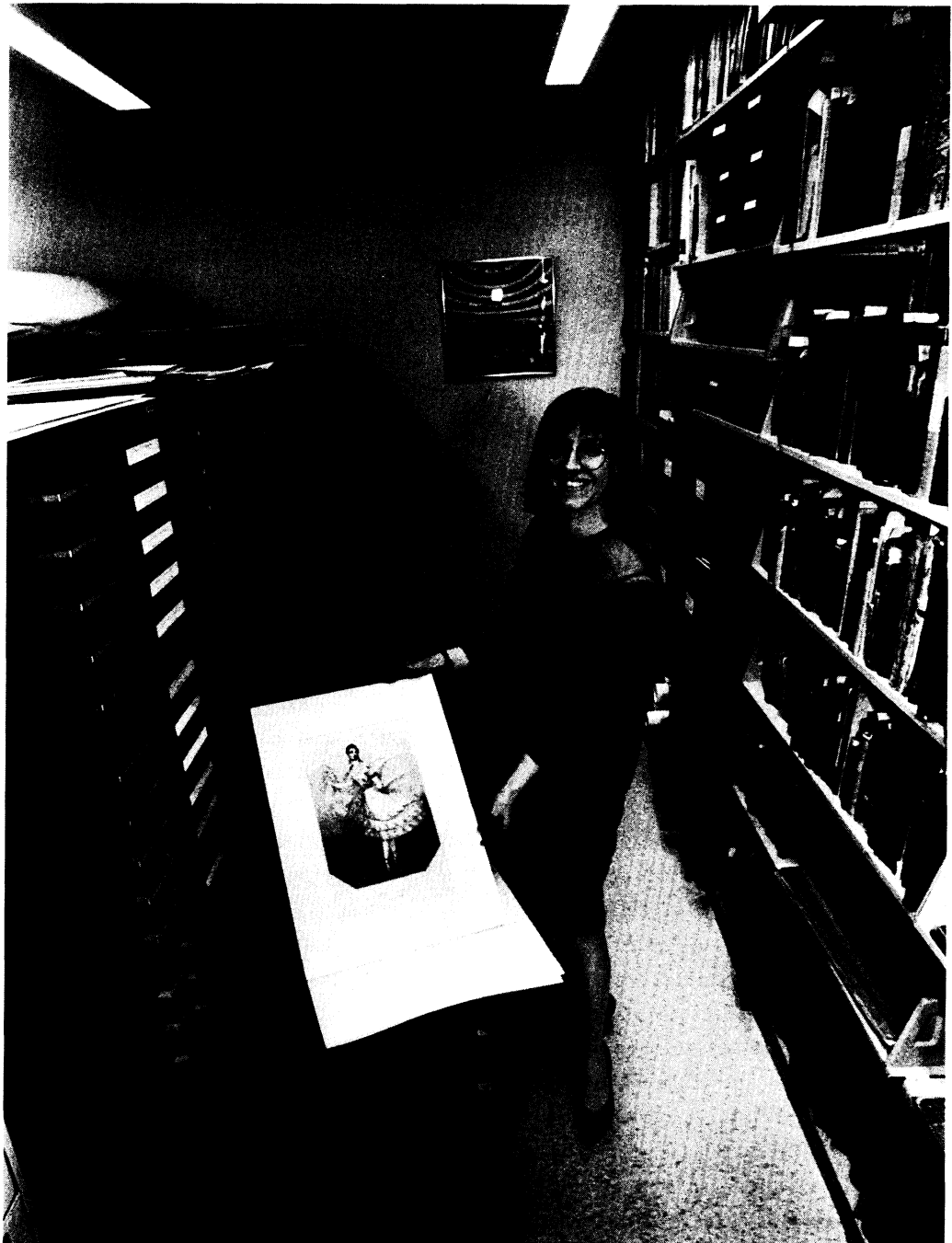
1881	474,943 volumes
1890	672,118 volumes
1901	904,062 volumes
1910	1,425,891 volumes
1920	2,100,200 volumes
1931	3,165,400 volumes

The statistics show the vast number of books at Harvard that may need treatment, for at least 3,165,400 volumes in the collection were acquired before 1932 and necessarily printed before that date. (Because some hundreds of thousands of volumes are pre-1800, one cannot say that the above statistics represent solely books from the era of brittle paper; moreover, many volumes acquired after 1932, even if published later than 1932, were printed on inferior paper that has become brittle.)

If those millions of volumes were primarily scholarly monographs issued by the major publishers and if they were acquired even-handedly among the various fields covered by the library, certain consequences for preservation would ensue. If the nature of the library is otherwise, certain other consequences may ensue. Thus, it becomes crucial to understand the collections.

The dominant pattern of acquisitions—either by gift or by collection acquired by gift or purchase—shows that they were not developed even-handedly. Even when, after 1859, book funds were allocated by department, a procedure that tends to result in even-handed buying of scholarly materials for current needs, the quantity added by purchase was, as has been pointed out, not large. In 1890, for instance, of the 13,365 volumes added to the central collection in Gore Hall, only 6,032 were by purchase, i.e. the monographs acquired through rationalized book fund allocations.

The other 7,000 volumes were not major contemporary scholarly works. They necessarily were largely primary materials: pamphlets, association copies, rarities, specially formed collections. Among them might be the contemporary pamphlet sent to a senator such as Charles Sumner and given by him to the library, the annual report of an organization promoting civil service reform, the private school catalog.



Catherine Johnson, Assistant Curator, the Theatre Collection, holds a print from the Wendell Collection. The Collection, bequeathed by Evert Jansen Wendell, 1882, includes thirty-five thousand volumes and pamphlets, fifty thousand pieces of sheet music, ninety thousand playbills, one hundred thousand photographs and engravings, and thousands of other items.

The library avidly sought such material. The librarian from 1856 to 1877, John Langdon Sibley, believed that the library “ought to contain at least one copy of every book, map, and pamphlet, written or published in this country, or pertaining to America.” At Commencement one year he distributed to every alumnus a circular conveying his view, and he continued always to beg for gifts. To Sibley it was also clear that “what is trash to me may be the part of the Library which will be the most valuable to another person.”

The Harvard librarian was not alone in this vision. For example, Frederic De Peyster, president of the New York Historical Society, in an address delivered in 1865, wrote, “There is danger, however, that we shall not have any adequate idea of the importance of collecting and preserving books, apparently the most worthless,

as well as those which have vindicated their claim to be regarded as standard works." He continued that quite apart from the possibility of our being mistaken in what is worthless, we need to gather everything; for, "in estimating the effects of various systems, social, political or intellectual, upon the mind or character, the discovery of some obscure pamphlet, written under certain influences which may be under consideration, will oftentimes prove a very important witness, and throw unexpected light upon the question involved."

Many American libraries were built by individuals who shared that approach. Harvard happened to be particularly successful in carrying out the vision. One reason appears to be the decentralization that permitted entrepreneurial collection building.

To summarize, the Harvard Library is one of the world's largest; its collections are international in language and geographic scope; the subject coverage is virtually encyclopedic, though with gaps; the degree of strength in various areas varies greatly, depending on gifts and collections that were acquired; the library is particularly strong in primary printed source materials, which by their nature are both rare and ephemeral; unique manuscript, archival, and visual collections are also among Harvard's holdings.

These are aspects of the collections that must be considered, both in setting priorities for serving Harvard scholars and students and, as well, in determining the nature of Harvard's contribution to the international preservation effort. One inescapable conclusion is that a library with such collections has an obligation to make every effort to preserve them.

The next section traces the growing awareness at Harvard of the desirability of greater efforts.