



# Among Harvard's Libraries: Retrospective conversion of the Harvard Library's card catalogs

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But the most important aspect of this fledgling effort is not the advantages for readers but rather the new opportunities and burdens it places on authors. An electronic book can contain text, animation, graphics, and sound, without significant increase in cost. It can be arranged in the so-called hypertext format, creating hierarchies of information. Because visible footnoting can be made an option—shown or hidden, as the reader wishes—exhaustive citation is possible. Every line of text can be annotated, enabling a reader to follow the author's thinking precisely. That in turn could make scholarly writing as rigorous as the writing of computer code. Right now that seems a horrific prospect, but I suspect that within a decade or two, scholars will begin to require far more extensive citations from their colleagues.

And certainly, publishing will move toward electronic formats, either in the form of CD-ROMs or high-density floppy disks. If nothing else, the cost of publication will drive the trend, and the cost of university archiving will reinforce it. And the inescapable conclusion is that once publication shifts to electronic forms, traditional monographs will become unsatisfactory. It will not be enough simply to publish a book on a disk. Books are peculiarly defined by the traditional demands of printed paper held together by binding. Once information is freed from those constraints, it will assume new forms.

What forms? That is in essence a research question, to be answered by the scholars who experiment with the new media in the coming years, and discover new ways to express their ideas. These individuals, and the institutions they represent, will shape the emerging technology, and define scholarship in the twenty-first century.

They will do it by placing hitherto unimaginable demands on libraries. Present users who want the university library open twenty-four hours a day express the sentiment of the future. Libraries will be increasingly perceived not as a storehouse for physical collections but as a resource, a service, a scholarly utility. Would you accept a telephone that only worked certain hours of the day? The challenges that libraries face are daunting, and the cost of conversion to the new digital world may seem alarming. But in confronting this new and powerful technology, the cost of delay is far greater.

#### RETROSPECTIVE CONVERSION OF THE HARVARD LIBRARY'S CARD CATALOGS

The deans of the various faculties, the president, and the Harvard Corporation, with the strong support of the Overseers' Visiting Committee to the Library, have approved a proposal to put the card catalogs of Harvard's libraries into electronic form. In six years or so, it will be possible for students in Wigglesworth Hall and in Lowell House, professors in Boylston Hall and Emerson Hall, or anywhere else, on campus or off, in Belmont, Boston, Omaha, or Osaka, to sit at a terminal and have the access that is now possible only by physically walking to libraries of the university and consulting their card catalogs. Information on virtually all of the books will be available, from the Gutenberg Bible on. More than five million library records in forty-six libraries will be converted. The cost will be between fifteen and twenty million dollars.

Slightly more than two hundred years ago, Harvard, in another major undertaking, also did what it could to make accessible its library, the largest in the United States. In 1790, the college printed a catalog of its books, after having hired someone who had painstakingly written down entries for them all. The printing job was completed at the end of 1790, and then on 19 January 1791, the Corporation decided on the distribution of copies. It voted that "a part of the three hundred copies of the Catalogue of the College Library be disposed of" as follows:

Within the College, twenty-four were to be kept in the library and not to be lent out; twenty-six were to be placed in the library to be lent to graduates and undergraduates; one was to go to each of the professors and tutors "in succession" (to be passed on to successors in the post?); one was to go to each member of the Corporation and to "each of the gentlemen of the Clergy who are Overseers."

Massachusetts government officials were to receive copies as follows: one each to the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, President of the Senate, and Speaker of the House of Representatives; two to the Governor's Council; three to the Senate, and three to the Representatives.

The federal government was taken care of as well: one to the President of the United

States, the Vice-President, the Senate, the House, the Secretary of State, Secretary of the Treasury, and Secretary of War, plus one to the Chief Justice.

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences, with two copies, was particularly favored among the learned societies and other educational institutions. Copies also were sent to each college in the United States, the Philosophical Society of Philadelphia, the Derby School, Royal Society of London, the Society of Antiquaries, the Society for Promoting Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce, the Royal Academy of Sciences at Paris, the French Academy, the Academy of Inscriptions and Belles Lettres, the New England Society in Great Britain, the Society for Propagating the Gospel in Foreign Parts, and the British Museum, plus one to each "academy" in the Commonwealth.

Donors and potential donors were sent copies: Dr. Lettsom, Granville Sharp Esquire, Dr. Price, Thomas Brand Hollis Esquire, John Gardiner Esquire, Dr. Erskine, Dr. Lindsey, and Dr. Priestley.

The distribution list shows that the technology was appropriate to the era. The distribution range was great, but the number was small; and perhaps all who would have been interested in Harvard's holdings had the information in a convenient form.

The main purpose of the printed catalog seems to have been to improve access, but it also served internal library purposes. Bound, interleaved copies provided space to record new accessions and to note changes in locations of books.

From the 1860s card catalogs began to replace printed catalogs in American libraries. Harvard's was begun in 1862. The reason for card catalogs is not that they are more convenient for users than book catalogs. They are not. Libraries switched to cards because they were appropriate to the changing times. Libraries were beginning to grow rapidly, with many thousands of books being added annually in the major institutions. Printed catalogs could not efficiently record that growth for users who wanted to know what the latest books were; it was not feasible to reset type and produce new catalogs at a pace sufficiently fast.

Before creating a card catalog for the public, Harvard librarians did so as a management tool, cards being easier to work with than a heavily annotated printed catalog. Thaddeus William Harris made the management uses

explicit in his 1840 annual report: "Such [a] catalogue . . . [is] much wanted when books are arranged for the Annual Examinations [of the Visiting Committee] to indicate missing books, and would also be extremely useful in facilitating the re-arrangement of books in the new library [Gore Hall], and would serve for various other useful purposes hereafter."

As useful as the card catalog is, it has never been the ideal means for recording library holdings. It could more easily be kept up-to-date than a printed catalog, but it had to be consulted on the spot. Even the professor in the next building had to go to the library itself to see whether it held a copy of a given work. No longer could individuals in Boston, Philadelphia, London, or Paris determine what was at Harvard.

The card catalog was a compromise between ease of access and completeness, convenience and flexibility, just as was the printed catalog and just as are all written catalogs, in whatever format. Only the electronic catalog frees the library and its users from the compromises inherent in past catalogs.

The deans and the Harvard Corporation, when they approved retrospective conversion, the library term for putting the information on cards into electronic form, did not do so on the basis of an historical disquisition. Necessarily, though, they considered the ability of the electronic format to serve both management and use, the twin purposes of all catalogs.

First, management. At the present time preservation and storage are two problems facing the library, and electronic records significantly help to solve each. Preservation microfilming requires them, because the institutional exchange of information on what has been filmed saves the cost of filming again. Use of the Harvard Depository also requires electronic records, because every volume is shelved and retrieved with the aid of barcodes. In both cases, if an electronic record does not exist, one must be created. Doing so on a small scale, item by item, is expensive. Large-scale conversion will utilize very efficient conversion vendors to search for existing catalog records and to key records for titles not found in the databases. The cost is obviously very much lower than in piecemeal conversion.

Even more important in the long run, without retrospective conversion the library would incur opportunity costs. To manage a library without records for all the holdings would be like running a business with only

part of the inventory computerized, only a portion of the mailing list in such a form that labels can easily be produced. For the non-computerized portion, options would be precluded. The attention of the managers would go to the computerized, rather than the non-computerized part of the business. That is simply how human beings are.

In the library, not only would opportunities be missed, the non-computerized portion would become devalued. Even with the best intentions of librarians, that would happen.

It is, in fact, in process of occurring now—on the part of the library's users. To see this, one need only walk to the second floor of Widener and compare the number of HOLLIS users with those sitting at the card catalog. At 12:10 on a recent Monday, seventeen people were sitting at HOLLIS terminals, while two individuals were looking up things in the Public Catalog. Predictably, they had gray hair.

The divergence cannot be accounted for solely by the scope of the two catalogs, pre-1976 publications in one, and those received since 1976 in the other. Newer publications, to be sure, do on the whole receive more use than earlier ones, but increasingly scholars are set up to download cataloging records, to create their own databases or bibliographical files, to pull a record from such a file and insert it as a footnote. Undergraduates use Internet to search databases, to communicate with specialists at other universities, to interview someone halfway around the world. For such individuals it would be painful to sit at a card catalog and fill in 3 x 5 cards, so much so that they do not do it.

Ever since the Distributable Union Catalog on microfiche was introduced in 1981, the danger has existed that the older books would become a dead collection, in comparison with the newer—not for intellectual reasons, but simply because of ease of access to the recent materials. That danger will be averted by retrospective conversion, and the benefits will extend well beyond the Yard. Conversion of Harvard's bibliographical records will make it easier for other libraries to do likewise (they will be able to draw on our records). Also, scholars elsewhere will be able to use Harvard's catalog, even if their own institutions have not converted. It is likely, indeed almost certain, that this project will foster more historical and literary scholarship on earlier centuries than there would otherwise have been.

To a lot of people, fostering kinship with the past is an element in furthering solidarity among all sorts and conditions of women and men throughout the globe. That matters very much, and so, in its way, does this project.

JUSTIN WINSOR  
ON LIBRARIES IN 1885

In the fall of 1991, Elaine Benfatto, who carries the HLB through from floppy disk to the film used in printing, gave birth to a son; and our mores have undergone such change that it was acceptable, even desirable, for a male boss to behave in grandfatherly fashion and pay a visit to mother and baby. The visit over, I inquired about the location of the Somerville Public Library, learned that it was nearby, and decided to pay another visit that day. A collector of material on libraries never knows when entering a library will prove fruitful.

The result was unexpected. In the vertical file of the Somerville Public Library was a clipping from the *Somerville Journal* of 5 October 1885, headed "OUR PUBLIC LIBRARY. DEDICATION OF THE NEW BUILDING. INTERESTING EXERCISES — ABLE ADDRESSES BY PROMINENT CITIZENS. FULL DESCRIPTION OF THE BUILDING AND ITS INTERIOR FINISH." It contained the major portion of the remarks of the "orator of the evening, Mr. Justin Winsor, librarian of Harvard College."

Justin Winsor, librarian of Harvard from 1877 to 1897, succeeded a great librarian/collector, John Langdon Sibley, who was assistant librarian from 1841 to 1856 and then librarian until 1876. Sibley wrote in 1856 the famous statement, "It [Harvard College Library] ought to contain at least one copy of every book, map, and pamphlet, written or published in this country, or pertaining to America." Three years later, after that warm-up, he expanded his vision: "I think it would be well if it were generally known that there was never anything printed of which we should not be grateful for one copy."

Justin Winsor was followed by Archibald Cary Coolidge, who was Director of the Harvard University Library from 1910 to 1928, and even before was extending the scope of the library's collections. Coolidge, as William Bentinck-Smith put it, with an absence of