



# Among Harvard's Libraries: A note on the origins of the Houghton Library

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A NOTE ON THE ORIGINS OF THE  
HOUGHTON LIBRARY

Kenneth E. Carpenter

The concept of the Houghton Library—of a separate building to house and administer a general rare book collection—was around Harvard longer than has hitherto been documented. It turns out to be another of the great contributions of Archibald Cary Coolidge, Director of the University Library from 1910 to 1928, with a nudge from George Parker Winship, then Librarian of the Harry Elkins Widener Collection.

A detailed statement about what we now know as the Houghton Library exists in a letter of 25 June 1924 from Coolidge to Winship. Winship had, at the instance of William L. Clements, received an honorary doctorate from the University of Michigan in 1917, was a member of the Committee of Management of the Clements Library, and had seen through the press *The William L. Clements Library of Americana at the University of Michigan*, a work that was apparently a joint undertaking with Clements. It had appeared just in time for the dedication of the Clements Library on 15 June 1923.

Coolidge's letter shows that the Clements Library in particular, but also the Pierpont Morgan and the John Carter Brown libraries, were the inspiration for the concept. Coolidge's contribution was to dream not of a special collection, but of a building housing all of the special materials. He saw that the fulfillment of this "ideal worth cherishing" required "a man of imagination as well as of means and generosity." The man was found in the person of Arthur A. Houghton, Jr. '29, and nearly eighteen years following Coolidge's letter the Houghton Library opened on the spot Coolidge had designated.

It seems that in 1924 Coolidge and Winship had Clements in mind as the "man of imagination," who might want to make a "splendid memorial." That phrase resulted from a suggestion of Winship, who wrote about an earlier draft on 24 June 1924:

Admirable! I am converted to your scheme & will send this along, as evidence of the impression created by the Ann Arbor foundation. You might even bait the hook a little more specifically—(with a) ↑ completing the ↓

sentence—after "unknown future"—with "benefactor who wishes to establish a memorial &c. &c.["] But the letter as it stands may be enough—

G.P.W.

The next day, the 25th, Coolidge sent back to Winship the version reproduced here, with a cover note: "I return my letter corrected. If you think it should be changed in any way you can hold it up. I am off for Squam tomorrow."

Winship did send the letter on to Clements, who merely acknowledged receipt on 30 June 1924: "I am in receipt of yours of the 21st, also this morning I received your letter from Coolidge."

Coolidge's letter was brought to my attention by Thomas R. Adams, librarian *emeritus* of the John Carter Brown Library, who ran across it while pursuing work on a biographical sketch of Winship. The letter is reproduced from a carbon copy in the Winship papers in the Harvard University Archives (HUG 4879.5, box 5 of 12); another copy, with Winship's response and the cover letter, is in UA III.50.8.11.1: Coolidge correspondence: A-Z 1922/23 -- A-Winship, 1923/24.

*Opposite: Carbon copy of a letter from Archibald Cary Coolidge, outlining plans for a project that would eventually become the Houghton Library. Reproduced by permission of the Harvard University Archives.*

AN ACQUISITIONS TRIP TO UKRAINE

Jaryna Turko Bodrock

Between 6 June and 4 July 1993, I traveled to Ukraine on a Special Project assessment trip sponsored by the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX). My purpose was to acquire material for the Harvard College Library and to establish mechanisms for future acquisitions.<sup>1</sup> I visited booksellers, purchasing agents, publishing houses, the Harvard Library's exchange partners, and other libraries and institutions, particularly those outside Kiev, in Lviv, Chernivtsi, Odessa, Simferopol, Dnipropetrovsk, and Kharkiv.

The dissolution of the USSR and the disastrous economic conditions that followed, especially in Ukraine, have left the Ukrainian book trade even more acutely troubled and chaotic than its Russian counterpart. The country has even less of an infrastructure supporting its book trade than does Russia; for during the Soviet period, bibliographic

JARYNA TURKO BODROCK is Acting Head of the Slavic Division at Widener Library.

<sup>1</sup> IREX published the report as *Library Assessment Project: Ukraine*.