



# Lamont Library: The first year

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## Lamont Library: The First Year

LAMONT is more clearly experimental than most new libraries because it is the first to be designed entirely for the benefit of a university's undergraduates and because it embodies an untried combination of ideas. Consequently college and university librarians everywhere have been interested, as well as students who use it and Harvard alumni, many of whom contributed to its endowment. Some results of the experiment can be estimated by any visitor, but other facts are apt to be discovered only by members of the staff responsible for operating the library. Perhaps those who are eager to make Lamont a success, particularly those who also had a hand in planning it, cannot hope to qualify as its severest critics, but there seem to be good reasons for reporting as objectively as possible what has been learned in the course of the first year's work in the building.

Earlier issues of the *HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN* have provided a comprehensive background for this report by publishing the thirteen articles dealing with undergraduate library services that will be cited here. College records for 1765 appear to contain the first definite indication of need for an undergraduate library, and the history of the subject from that date onward has been traced by Messrs Metcalf and Lovett.<sup>1</sup> They report a gradual extension of library hours and liberalizing of borrowing privileges, and a certain amount of disappointment with Widener, which proved to be large and impersonal, and in which most undergraduates could be allowed direct access only to reserved books, the Farnsworth Room's recreational reading,<sup>2</sup> and a few other volumes. The main reading room in Widener was never wholly satisfactory as a reserved book center,<sup>3</sup> and it had to be supplemented by collections for large beginning classes in Boylston and the Union. The

<sup>1</sup> Keyes D. Metcalf, 'The Undergraduate and the Harvard Library, 1765-1877,' *HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN*, I (1947), 29-51; Robert W. Lovett, 'The Undergraduate and the Harvard Library, 1877-1937,' *H.L.B.*, I (1947), 221-237; Keyes D. Metcalf, 'The Undergraduate and the Harvard Library, 1937-1947,' *H.L.B.*, I (1947), 288-305.

<sup>2</sup> David McCord, 'The Farnsworth Room, 1916-1946,' *H.L.B.*, I (1947), 109-111.

<sup>3</sup> Philip J. McNiff, 'Reading Room Problems of the Harvard College Library, 1942-1947,' *H.L.B.*, I (1947), 254-256.

latter also housed a general collection that was particularly helpful to freshmen, for whom there is no House Library.<sup>4</sup>

Ample quarters for reserved-book reading and a large open-shelf collection for undergraduates might have been included, with many other things, in a great new central library for Harvard that would have had to be several times as big as Widener. Instead, Mr Metcalf proposed that Widener be retained as the general research library and that it be supplemented by a building for rare books and manuscripts, storage facilities for little-used materials, a separate undergraduate library, and subterranean stacks. Houghton and the New England Deposit Library were built as the first two supplements; Lamont constitutes the third and, with the two levels of stack beneath, the initial unit of the fourth.<sup>5</sup>

The three major objectives of the Lamont Library were stated by Mr Metcalf as follows:

To concentrate as far as is practicable the library service for undergraduates in a central location

To make the books readily available to the students

To encourage general and recreational as well as assigned and collateral reading.<sup>6</sup>

One can easily demonstrate that Lamont has meant a great deal of progress in these general directions. It combines the undergraduate reserve collections from Widener, Boylston, the Union, and several special libraries. Its general collection contains material in some subjects, notably the sciences, that students used to have to obtain from laboratory collections north of the Yard. Centralization, of course, was never intended to swallow up the seven House Libraries,<sup>7</sup> but Lamont can offer them help in book selection. The House Libraries continue to thrive, and undergraduate services are continued by libraries in certain fields such as fine arts, because decentralization is desirable in some circumstances, not because it is imposed by lack of space at the undergraduate library center.

The ready availability of books was assured by the basic plan of the

<sup>4</sup> Robert W. Lovett, 'The Harvard Union Library, 1901 to 1948,' *H.L.B.*, II (1948), 230-237.

<sup>5</sup> Keyes D. Metcalf, 'Harvard Faces Its Library Problems,' *H.L.B.*, III (1949), 183-197.

<sup>6</sup> *H.L.B.*, I (1947), 305.

<sup>7</sup> Frank N. Jones, 'The Libraries of the Harvard Houses,' *H.L.B.*, II (1948), 362-377.

building,<sup>5</sup> which provides an alcove-type stack through the center, open on one side to the major reading areas and on the other to entrances, the reference room, and special collections. Users of the library, almost as often as they enter, move from one room to another, or leave, can hardly avoid passing through corridors or alcoves lined with books.

The third objective is very broad. Undergraduate reading of one kind or another may be encouraged to some extent by the smallest detail that makes any reader more comfortable and may be discouraged at least slightly by the mildest annoyance or smallest inconvenience. There is statistical evidence that general undergraduate reading increased materially after Lamont opened; Widener outside charges dropped only slightly in 1949, and the total for Widener and Lamont was 37,000 volumes greater than the Widener figure for 1948, when Lamont was not yet available. In addition, 94,000 overnight charges for reserved books during 1949 represented an increase of more than 17,000 over the preceding year, in spite of the fact that there were 500 fewer students and that such books are not allowed to leave Lamont until 9:00 p.m. except on Saturdays. There can be no doubt that undergraduate use of books within the Library also increased, for Lamont has had more than 800 readers at once on several occasions — a hundred more than could have been crowded into the areas formerly available to undergraduates even if everyone else had been excluded from the main reading room in Widener.

Centralization, because it brings greater convenience, has undoubtedly contributed to these results. So has the availability of books and the improvement of the book stock by increased duplication of heavily used titles. This duplication has made it possible to restrict to closed shelves (behind the charging desks in Lamont) fewer reserved books than ever before. Books for the large survey courses, reading period books, and a few titles in short supply were held behind the desks at the start of 1949. During the summer, however, all books were placed on open shelves, and this policy was continued during the fall except for courses in which excessive pressure developed and for reading period assignments in history, government, economics, and social relations. As was to be expected, some students cause trouble by breaking even the most liberal rules; the staff must watch closely and be ready to shift

<sup>5</sup> Henry R. Shepley and Keyes D. Metcalf, 'The Lamont Library,' *H.L.B.*, III (1949), 5-30. This article includes both plans and photographs.

books to closed reserve whenever the demand in any course becomes too great. Closed reserves can probably never be abolished completely, but they can be reduced in number still further as enrollment falls to the normal level and as more of the books that are needed come back into print.

The chief complaints with regard to reserved books come from patrons of Widener rather than Lamont, and arise when copies of a title are not available in the former building either because it has seemed necessary to shift all copies to reserve in Lamont or because the Widener copy has been borrowed or lost. The establishment in Widener of a non-circulating collection of copies of reserved books ought to do a good deal toward solving this problem; meanwhile every effort must be made to correct mistakes and replace losses. The general collection in Lamont, it should be emphasized, was assembled by purchase and by the transfer of duplicates, not of unique copies, from Widener.<sup>9</sup> Some increased annoyance is probably inevitable in any case, for, if two collections have copies of a book yet both fail to produce one for him, the scholar's frustration is greater than if there had been but one place in which to seek it and be disappointed.

Availability implies not only open shelves but a minimization of all other barriers between readers and books. Enormous catalogues such as those in Widener serve as invaluable keys for scholars, but are necessarily so complex that they are discouraging and time-consuming barriers to undergraduates. The Lamont catalogue is small; moreover, facilities are provided for by-passing it whenever possible. Visible indexes at the charging desks just inside the entrances to the building list reserved books by author, and the books themselves are arranged alphabetically by author under each department of instruction rather than under individual courses. Annotated copies of reading lists are also provided.

The classification scheme for the general collection was prepared to fit the library in which it is used,<sup>10</sup> and indexed copies are at hand in each stack alcove. Bulletin boards on each of the three main levels contain floor plans, a topical index to the classification, an index to the location of book collections, and a directory.

<sup>9</sup> Edwin F. Williams, 'The Selection of Books for Lamont,' *H.L.B.*, III (1949), 386-394.

<sup>10</sup> Richard O. Pautzsch, 'The Classification Scheme for the Lamont Library,' *H.L.B.*, IV (1950), 126-127.

Reference service is also more readily available to undergraduates than it was in Widener, where faculty members, visiting scholars, and graduate students tended to monopolize it. There has been a gradual but distinct rise in the number and quality of reference questions since Lamont opened, and it is hoped that this will continue as students develop the habit of turning to librarians for bibliographical help.<sup>11</sup> The Reference Department maintains a visible index to the periodical collection, for which it is responsible, and a small pamphlet file. The latter is an innovation that deserves to be further developed, and several current lists are being checked for new material. A good deal of work has also gone into building up the back files of serials. Since Lamont periodicals do not leave the library they are often consulted by graduate students and other scholars who find that volumes from Widener sets have been charged out. Still another duty of the reference staff is the ordering (usually by means of telephone calls to local dealers) and processing of books needed on short notice for required reading. Regular acquisition and cataloguing work for the library is done in Widener.

One more contribution to the availability of books is the simplicity of the charging system<sup>12</sup> and the fact that the only control points are at the exits from the building. A student can take books anywhere in Lamont without formalities; when he wishes to take them from the building he need only fill out a simple slip for each and have the attendant charge them as he leaves.

Certain other features that are meant to encourage reading may be grouped under the heading of comfort. Light and air are important items here, and it is good to be able to report that the lighting throughout the building appears to have been satisfactory, and the air-conditioning system has worked well.

Since students are not all alike and since many an individual's wants vary with the type of reading he happens to be doing, variety in facilities can contribute a good deal to comfort. Smoking areas have been provided on each level and, while they have been well filled at times, they never seem to have been inadequate in size. The ten typing cubicles on the mezzanine levels have also sufficed to meet the demand.

The furniture seems to have been generally satisfactory, and to have

<sup>11</sup> Morrison C. Haviland, 'The Reference Function of the Lamont Library,' *H.L.B.*, III (1949), 297-299.

<sup>12</sup> Philip J. McNiff, 'The Charging System of the Lamont Library,' *H.L.B.*, III (1949), 438-440.

provided for a variety of needs. The individual stalls along the outer walls of the three large reading areas and on both sides of the mezzanine levels have been the most popular study accommodations, particularly during reading and examination periods, when semi-privacy seems to be at a premium. Next have come the individual study tables along the north window of the Reference Room and along both sides of the screens that divide the reading areas. The armchairs provided in the stalls and at most of the tables in the building are good looking, comfortable, and, it is believed, durable. The eight sloping-top tables have been used to some extent, but not enough to suggest that there ought to have been more of them. There has been heavy use of the semi-lounge chairs, which come in both large and small models and are covered with red, green, or brown leather. These are relatively less popular during reading and examination periods, but some experts at note-taking by means of clip-board and knee prefer them at all times. It might be added that there are those who seem to find two such chairs essential to complete comfort.

The light natural finish of all the woods that have been used helps to avoid the institutional look associated with dark furniture, but blemishes, of course, show up clearly on the light surfaces. A year may be too short a period to indicate how serious this factor will be. Some of the chairs and tables on the third level were not sufficiently rugged at first, but this defect was easily remedied by the substitution of longer screws or of bolts for the original screws or glue.

Nearly all the furniture on this level was designed by Mr Alvar Aalto, the famous Finnish architect, and made in Sweden. Of the same origin are the small chairs with red or green leather seats at the individual tables in the Reference Room, in the Forum Room, and in each alcove of the stack, where they have been particularly convenient for students consulting the lower shelves.

Two special rooms add to the variety that distinguishes Lamont. Some confusion might be avoided if it were customary to speak of the Farnsworth collection rather than the Farnsworth Room, for the new Farnsworth Room in Lamont, finished in natural cherry, differs a good deal from its smaller predecessor of the same name in Widener. The collection was renovated during the war years before it left Widener;<sup>13</sup> the furniture, though out of keeping with the style of the new room and of the building, was perforce transferred also, but will be replaced

<sup>13</sup> Cf. McCord, *op. cit.* (note 2 above).

shortly through the generosity of Mrs Farnsworth Loomis, daughter of the original donors of the Room. Students undoubtedly have welcomed the repeal of bans on smoking and note-taking. Still, when one recalls that few books except the open reserves and the Farnsworth collection used to be directly accessible to undergraduates, it seems remarkable that now, in a building with open shelves holding nearly 100,000 volumes, the Farnsworth Room is more popular than ever.

The Woodberry Poetry Room, next door to Farnsworth, also contains a collection formerly housed in Widener. Its new setting in Lamont was designed by Mr Aalto with the approval and generous assistance of Mr Harry N. Flagler, who established the room in 1931 in memory of his friend and teacher, George H. Woodberry. The beautifully grained woods used in paneling, book shelves, cabinets, and furniture, and the unusual imported lighting fixtures have attracted a good deal of attention. There are 3,500 volumes of modern poetry and more than 1,100 records of poetry readings, folk ballads, and Shakespearean plays. Four turntables, to each of which eight sets of earphones can be attached, are provided for the playing of records; in addition there are four chair stations, each accommodating four sets of earphones, which can be tuned in to any one of the turntables. Loudspeaker equipment in the Forum Room next door provides for listening by classes or other groups.

The Poetry Room is now open all day, and it is heavily used. More than 8,500 students listened to records during the first ten months in Lamont, and this figure does not include visitors or students who merely sampled the equipment. All four of the turntables are often in use at once. The wear and tear on records and machinery will lead to bills for replacements, but expenditures necessitated by heavy student use are certainly justifiable.

Additional variety in Lamont is offered by the exhibits, for which twelve built-in cases were provided along the east-west corridors on the three main levels. A permanent display on the first level, arranged by Mr Philip Hofer, Curator of Printing and Graphic Arts in the College Library, deals with the making of prints and reproductions and letterpress printing. The rest of the cases were given over when the library opened to 'The Undergraduate and the Harvard College Library.' During the year that followed, exhibits were sponsored by the Crimson Photographic Board, Ivy Films, the Philatelic Society, and the Harvard Photographic Society; members of the library staff have ar-



ranged exhibits on spring sports at Harvard before 1900, the history of the Summer School, seventy-five years of Harvard football, and the George Brinton Beale Circus Collection.

Not all of the building is devoted to facilities for the reading, housing, or display of books. The Forum Room, which seats 150 and has both loud-speaker and motion-picture projection equipment, has been mentioned as an adjunct to the Poetry Room's record collection, but it has several other uses. Various groups that have met in it include classes, student organizations, and librarians. The dedication program for the Lamont building took place in the room on 10 January 1949, and the successful completion of the Lamont Endowment Fund Campaign was announced there on 10 March 1949 by Mr Dwight P. Robinson, Jr, Chairman of the Harvard Fund Council, at a meeting of Class Agents. University presidents and librarians from leading institutions throughout the country met there during March, 1949, for the Conference on the Place of the Library in a University.

There are also smaller meeting rooms and offices, and it should be noted that librarians are by no means unanimously of the opinion that it is desirable to provide such rooms in a library. Mr Lamont was interested in developing a close relationship between the General Education program and the undergraduate library, since he realized that the new curriculum was designed in part 'to encourage wider undergraduate reading.'<sup>14</sup> Members of the faculty who are giving General Education courses occupy the office space in Lamont, and section meetings of some General Education courses, as well as other small classes, use the ten conference rooms, each of which seats from twenty to thirty students. The movement of groups to and from classrooms has caused no trouble; since hundreds of readers sometimes leave the building on the hour to go to classes elsewhere in the Yard, it would have been necessary in any case to provide exits capable of handling heavy traffic.

Some courses have not used the building because women are not admitted to it at most times. Many students and faculty members deplore the exclusion of Radcliffe from Harvard's new library, but exclusion was decided upon by administrative authorities of the two colleges before the building was planned. Radcliffe, it is pointed out, maintains its own undergraduate library, and is not prepared to help support a second. Consequently Lamont's size was determined by estimates based on Harvard enrollment alone, and no provision was made

<sup>14</sup> *H.L.B.*, I (1947), 302.

for supervision of reading areas. Satisfactory quiet has prevailed in these areas as was anticipated, but the experience of other colleges indicates that coeducational use would bring conversational disturbances. Women attending the Summer School use the building, however, and visitors of both sexes are admitted on Saturday afternoons throughout the year.

The classrooms and Forum Room were particularly popular during Lamont's first summer, when there was unusually warm weather and the new library offered the only air-conditioned meeting places at Harvard. It is expensive to cool a building, and Lamont would have been closed if the Harvard Summer School had not been willing to underwrite the additional cost. This investment seems to have been a good one. The preliminary announcement for 1950 has a picture of Lamont on the cover and refers to it as 'in many ways the new core of the Harvard Summer School.' A memorandum prepared by the Summer School Office, after pointing out that heat has always been one hazard that must be overcome if academic standards for summer work are to be maintained, states that modern, air-conditioned reading facilities in a student-centered library resulted in a four-fold increase in book use, and that there was 'a significant decline in the number of failures and unsatisfactory work.'

It might seem appropriate to conclude with this gratifying testimonial, but some readers — particularly librarians who have to plan their own new buildings — may think criticisms more instructive than praise. It must be confessed, however, that an attempt to find flaws has yielded only distinctly minor ones that affect those who operate the building rather than those who read in it. There are four that ought to be mentioned:

Light colored rubber-tile treads were placed on the double stairways at the east and west ends of the building in order to distinguish each step clearly; unfortunately they look very dirty after a few hours of use. Adequate maintenance will continue to require a good deal of work unless a more effective cleaning compound can be discovered.

The light switches are not in the same place on each level, and some of them are awkwardly located.

Facilities for the staff are scattered through the building; some staff time might have been saved if they had been centered at the east end of the fourth level.

The storage room provided for the janitor and cleaning staff was

intended to accommodate trash barrels in addition to supplies. Experience has taught, however, that refuse, when it consists largely of the contents of ashtrays and smokadors, stinks and ought to be kept outside the building. Therefore plans are now being made for an outdoor receptacle for trash barrels. It might have been preferable to have the service entrance on the same level as the janitor's quarters, but supplies for the most part come from Widener via tunnel, and no difficulties have developed.

These are remarkably few and insignificant regrets to feel after a year of experience with a new building. The staff's pride in the library seems to be justified, and anyone who examines circulation statistics or walks through the reading areas will find evidence that Harvard students are not neglecting the opportunities provided them by those who helped to create or maintain the Lamont Library. There is now a collection of books chosen for undergraduates, and barriers to its use have been minimized; competition with more advanced scholars for reference services is no longer necessary; and each student — with exceptions including those who prefer to read in bed or with feminine companionship — should be able to find furniture to suit him within a few steps of the shelves.

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