



# "At home in Widener Library" in "Widener Library: Voices from the stacks"

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## At Home in Widener Library

*T.N. Bisson*

The task of writing something about my experience of Widener Library has proved harder than I expected. This is not because the Library means less to me than I had first supposed but because it means even more. What became clear upon reflection is that Widener's value to me as a teacher-scholar in European history has long since become internalized in my consciousness, so that, just as one comes to take for granted the good spouse one is blessed to have, I came to count on Widener without even knowing it.

That said, I must add that I long ago recognized and have never lost sight of Widener Library's glittering merits for my research and teaching. Perhaps foremost among these are Widener's strength and depth in historical collections together with convenience of access to diverse printed materials well organized by field. It is depth and convenience that render Widener Library superior to any single library in western Europe for my purposes. That is why, when sometimes asked where I expect to spend my appointed time on leave, I usually say "at home," a place my wife would probably define as Widener Library.

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My experience of Widener goes back more than four decades. In the years 1951–55 I became progressively interested in history, medieval history, and the problem how people in southern France began to associate in parliamentary ways in the age of the Albigensian crusades. Visits to family in West Newton during vacations were occasions to become familiar with Harvard's topography. Widener was my landmark, reached by bus or train and later by car, which I would park on Prescott or Ware; or in still later years as far east as Ellery or Dana. I would write ahead for permissions the details of which I have forgotten except that they were never withheld; and would come in for a day's work with well-defined questions or tasks that lay beyond the limits of Princeton's Firestone Library (which I thoroughly valued in its ways as well). Once my "day" happened to be a Commencement Day (it may have been in June 1956), and I remember hearing and watching some of the oratory from the Reference Room. Mainly I wandered or borrowed vacant carrels during those visits in the south stacks, where the Older Widener Fr materials were then shelved. But my earliest serious prey was what I had learned by 1955, before I first went to France, was among Widener's most precious treasures: the *Inventaires sommaires* of the departmental and communal archives of France. Harvard's holdings of this set were then, I believe, second only to those in the New York Public Library; and so it happened that, since I never found a fuller set (not



On the left are hundreds of inventories of French archives that are indispensable to the author's scholarship.  
Photo credit: Mary Lee.

even in France), Widener was where I learned a lesson every fledgling historian of Europe must learn: namely, how to find access to unpublished source material by means of printed catalogues and inventories. When I spent the academic year 1956–57 in Paris, Toulouse, and other places in southern France, I was prepared to seek out the most promising *fonds* for historical exploration, thanks to Harvard's open-shelved possession of this great resource.

Thereafter I had the good fortune to begin teaching at Amherst College and Brown University (1957–65): that is, in castles conveniently close by the well-stocked cloisters of *Veritas* to make scholarly pillaging a tempting pastime. I learned to appreciate—and began to take for granted—the marvels of having on Widener's open shelves the proceedings of local learned societies, such as the *Recueil des travaux de la Société d'agriculture, sciences et arts d'Agen*. They were not always easy to locate in their ever mutating titles—it was yet another of Widener's lessons to look first under *Société*, the sponsoring body, not the title—but they were even harder to find in the Bibliothèque nationale (where, in any case, browsing was no option). I began to think of visits to Widener like alternative, and far less costly, round-trip tickets to Agen and countless other little places whose serials there alone could be freely consulted—as in Widener. And it was in those years of dissertating, revising for publication, and prospecting toward a second book that the full meaning of a great academic library for a scholarly career became evident.

For a North American engaged in the study of European history one not only *could* work “at home” (in the sense I invoked above) but *should* do so for reasons of cost and efficiency alike. A great deal of original historical research is carried on in printed records and texts; investigators in some fields, such as religious thought, might never need to study unprinted materials. But my point is that even the majority of us who do need to work in European manuscript collections and archival deposits can do so many of the tasks associated with such research as to lose all good excuse for wasting time in extravagantly loving company with original records and artifacts. Sojourns abroad ceased for me to be desperate scrambles to

accomplish the impossible, became better focused, even pleasantly diverting.

After 1967 Widener became a more distant paragon. It was the standard by which I judged other proximate libraries: the Van Pelt Library of the University of Pennsylvania (with its splendid Henry Charles Lea collection) and the Charles Franklin Doe Library at Berkeley. The latter, which was my research “home” for nearly two decades, supported my interests in all the ways I had learned to value in Widener. And in two different ways it constantly reminded me of Widener. Its great printed collections, such as the *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France* (1738–1904) which I had first used at Princeton and Harvard, were obviously acquisitions of visionary value, evoking a *fin de siècle* generation of scholars, often Harvard-trained or affiliated, such as William A. Morris and Louis J. Paetow, who were among the intellectual founders of the University of California. Secondly, the very structure of Doe Library recalled Widener, and not accidentally so. With their ceremonial staircases and spacious reference rooms, they were near simultaneous (Doe 1911, Widener 1913) products of a common inspiration in traditional monumental architecture. I felt at home in the library at Berkeley, soon discovered with pride what books Doe possessed and Widener did not—there were some—, and found myself supported intellectually in most of the ways I am attempting here to comprehend.

So it would be wrong to say that I moved to Harvard (in 1986) on account of Widener Library. Much of what I value here I had luckily found elsewhere, and many other considerations affected that decision to return to my homeland. But when I suggest to prospective graduate students that one reason for preferring Harvard is its possession of the greatest academic library in the world, I am only reiterating a reason I myself found weighty. Nor have I been disappointed in my rediscovery of Widener even as, for the first time, I experience this institution in its problems as well as its glories. It is a library in full transformation, and some of the changes in progress, however necessary they may be from an administrative point of view, affect adversely the old conditions of acquisition and access I once cherished (here *and* elsewhere). But of course to teach in this university is to be privileged not merely in Widener but in the Harvard University Library, by which I refer to the whole range of collections and services, including Lamont and Hilles libraries, and the convenience of reading libraries in the Department of History and the Houses.

Let me add a few words about convenience and its history. Today I am privileged to have working space of my own in Widener, a kind of scholarly *summum bonum* in my field. I’m sometimes tempted to imagine Harvard’s stacks as an extension of my personal library, thankful for the freedom to fetch or consult on shelves at will. But the private convenience of the faculty is not what I meant in referring to Harvard’s supremacy among working libraries. Nor do I refer to the improved public access to Widener collections, which has created a massive competition for use of Harvard’s materials even when these are available in public libraries. It would be unseemly of me to oppose the sort of accessibility I myself once enjoyed; but the numbers of nonmembers of the University seem much increased today, to the inconvenience of our graduate students. I am told, and have sometimes seen for myself, that Harvard’s copies of standard books tend to deteriorate physically faster than those elsewhere. Public accessibility, now vastly amplified by electronic means,

is a problematic form of convenience. As for instruments of access themselves, Harvard seems to me neither better nor worse than other libraries (known to me) making the shift from cards and registers to electronic tools. In my experience the card catalog retains so much of its value that I warmly applaud the decision to retain the public catalog, even if in a less than central location (a corridor in Pusey). It is one of Harvard's manuscript treasures, a witness to Harvard's intellectual history, and remains convenient for some kinds of searches in older publications.

What I understand by convenience is above all the juxtaposition of excellent working collections—historical, national-regional, topical—in which documentary editions, serials, monographs, and interpretative scholarship about France (say) or urbanism or ecclesiastical history are shelved together. Those who have worked as I have in the Bibliothèque nationale or the British Library or the Biblioteca de Catalunya will know that any one of these grand national repositories contains even more than Widener of what pertains strictly to its land's doings. Yet no one of them, nor any lesser library, can match Widener for ease in moving from field to field or in comparative research, for its concentration of virtual libraries within the Harvard College Library. These juxtaposed collections are of necessity select, so that for some purposes in my field, for example, one would have to visit the Ecole des Chartes or the Vatican Library. The British Library may have even more depth in most fields than Widener. But for general convenience (as here defined) *and* depth Widener seems to me second to none.

And these attributes may be called the plantation of visionaries. One has only to browse the historical collections to see how much Widener's distributive strength owes to Harvard graduates of the nineteenth century, whether in individual acquisitions or the institution of funds for purchase in grand fields. Archibald Cary Coolidge (A.B. 1887; Professor of History, 1908–28; and Director of the Harvard University Library, 1910–28) was the most conspicuous benefactor. It was he "who," as Kenneth E. Carpenter has written, "through his teaching and through building the Harvard Library, made American education international in scope." Some who read these lines may be amused to know that I once supposed that his interests lay in French and medieval history (as indeed they did); it was mind-stretching to learn that he also virtually founded the collections in German, East European, Slavic, Russian, and Turkish histories!

What A.C. Coolidge somewhat recklessly created was the uncompromised commitment to *keep up* with a modern world scribbling ever more insistently and portentously. Today the containers of knowledge are shifting—and multiplying—so that the sort of traditional convenience and depth I have defined becomes problematic, especially when viewed in relation to the building that so finely housed the growing collections in Professor Coolidge's day. When I joined Harvard's faculty I discovered to my surprise that the greatest library for medieval studies in North America was also one of the most difficult to work in; that the convenience it afforded in reading and research did not extend to the stages of writing, reference, and verification. It seemed ironic that, having appointed study rooms in Widener to Classics, English, Celtic, etc., the Harvard faculty which virtually founded medieval studies in the 1920s by instituting The Medieval Academy of America (it occupies offices in Harvard Square to this day) neglected to stake out interdepartmental space in Widener for an interdisciplinary field perceptibly resembling the Classics (in the combination of history, art, literature, religion, and

their auxiliary disciplines). It took another generation, it is true, for medieval studies as such to find the faculty advocates, Morton Bloomfield and Giles Constable, who organized it as a Standing Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Today, medieval studies have not only overtaken the Classics in respect to the bulk of materials original and secondary now in print but promise continued growth in the future. And for a reason Professor Coolidge would have understood, even if in his day the multiplicity of nations seemed of foremost import: namely, that the societies and centuries we label medieval, wherever they are located, are the pre-modern societies that we know, or can know, best; they are far more abundantly documented than those of classical Antiquity. What is more, on the threshold of a new millennium we are nearing a stage created by a century of editorial achievement in which a vast bulk of medieval texts together with inscriptions, buildings, coins, and other artifacts will be available in standard printed editions such as can be gathered in major libraries.

So as the Middle Ages I cultivate become venerably classicized, I am glad to have at close hand the Widener Room D first ordained by Professor E.K. Rand (of Classics), himself a "founder of the Middle Ages" (to evoke the title of his well-known book) at Harvard, and now redesigned by the Standing Committee as a reference room in Medieval Studies. It will restore convenience to the one facet of Widener's resources in which my students and I had most felt its absence. A further improvement in Widener's resources in the medieval field stems from another characteristic act of alumni generosity. By bequeathing many of his books to Harvard, William Mendel Newman (A.B. '25, A.M. '26), a distinguished medievalist historian, has marvelously supported research on medieval France, his strong and well bound duplicate copies relieving pressure on the badly deteriorating volumes of the Older Widener collection.

If Widener can grow and adapt with the world's knowledge it houses, it will remain an incomparable home to scholarship. But it must not be marginalized. More good research is presently finding its way into print than ever before. It is already clear that prolonged reading from electronic screens is tiring or even injurious, while "printing out" can mean using as much or more paper than before and simply redistributing costs to the individual. The greatness of Harvard's Library and its reputation depend on its wealth of printed material and on its determination to maintain this leadership at a time when, to say again what bears repeating, more good research is going into print than ever before. We should avoid the costly experimenting and pioneering in electronic technologies, simply adopting the best *proven* implements of bibliographic access to our needs. As for developing alternative modes of communications and databases, this may arguably be necessary; but Harvard scholars, above all in the humanities but not only there, need to have a library that continues to acquire and care for the scholarship and creativity that is available only in print. Luckily, this has been rendered possible by well functioning policies of storage and retrieval. Libraries are for books, for reading, for all that provides context and interpretation as well as information. It is our books that render the Harvard College Library unique, that will keep this university a great center of scholarship and teaching.