

“An Army without Ammunition”: Books and the College Library

*David H. Stam
Syracuse University
September 9, 2005*

An address delivered to the Hamilton College chapter of Phi Beta Kappa as its first Richard W. Couper Library Lecture.

Thank you very much for that introduction. Mine has been a gratifying career in libraries, and I've often wondered how I ended up in some of the places I've been lucky enough to be. This afternoon is one of those occasions, and I cannot begin to express my pleasure and privilege in being asked to deliver the first lecture in this series, associated as it is with two of my closest colleagues in librarianship, Richard W. Couper and Randy Ericson. Dick Couper hired me as Director of the Research Libraries at New York Public Library in 1978; ten years later I enticed Randy from Hamilton College to Syracuse University as Associate University Librarian; twelve years later he returned to Hamilton as your first Richard W. Couper Librarian. No conjunction of people and places could have pleased me more. Both were far more than co-workers but colleagues, partners, and friends in the truest sense.

Among other things Dick and I were squash partners. It always seems a bit odd that fierce opponents should be called partners, but we were fairly

evenly matched on the court. I had a slight advantage in mobility and he in shrewdness and what I called at the time “quick defensive moves.” I once told that to the late Gordon Ray, President of the Guggenheim Foundation, a mutual friend, and a great sports enthusiast, who remarked that Dick must have learned those moves in his ten years as President of the New York Public Library. The euphemism in our respective calendars for sneaking off to a squash game was “conference” and both our secretaries knew what it meant. An honest deception in fact—we did confer quite a bit, sweat and labored breathing notwithstanding.

In what follows I will be speaking about some of the trials and tribulations of Hamilton College and its library in the nineteenth century. But I want to say first that Richard Couper presided over the New York Public Library in one of the most difficult decades of its history. The city of New York was on the point of fiscal collapse, endowments were stagnant, inflation was eroding collection growth, unions were restless, racial tensions were never far from the surface, and high morale was difficult to sustain. I only experienced the last three years of that period when the light was already appearing at the end of the decade, but I have no doubt that Dick’s steadfast leadership was the basis on which the Library’s rejuvenation was to

follow. With many others, I am in his debt and happy to repay some of it in this small way.

I could go on with reminiscences of my time with Dick Couper, but Phi Beta Kappa is nothing if not serious and I had better be as well. My topic is the nineteenth-century history of the Hamilton College Library, in particular the views of its administrators and faculty on what a College Library should be. The history has been well documented by a former library staff member, John Malcolm Allan, in his four-volume thesis on the Library, bringing the story up to 1963. I've taken more of an outsider's view working through some of the printed and manuscript sources of the College Library and College Archives. Even though I have barely scratched the surface, I found rich materials not only here but at the New York Public Library and the Syracuse University Library as well.

In his annual report of July 1865, Librarian Anson J. Upson, praised recent additions to the collections and the generosity of donors, lamented the poor condition of many books and the need for rebinding funds, pointed out the necessity for a printed catalogue (he claimed that his own memory was then "the only accessible guide to those who ask for books"), encouraged an increase in periodical subscriptions, and pleaded for a suitable building for the growing collections. Then he concluded with this stirring metaphor:

“...a College without books & those continuously provided to meet increasing demands, is like an army without ammunition.”

Since Upson’s report covers almost all of the period of the Civil War, from 1862 to 1865, perhaps the military simile is not surprising; he might have gone on to ask for a new Fort Hamilton to house the books. But the brief report is also remarkable in that its five brief pages touch on almost all the common topics of library history: collections and how they develop; cataloging the collections; preservation; funding; inflation; inadequate housing, collection growth, and the space to accommodate it. There are a few things he missed that usually show up in any library history: nothing about the classification of books (i.e., how they are arranged on the shelf), nothing about staffing, nothing about security, nothing about loss and decay (other than rotting bindings), and nothing about technology. On the last topic there was in fact nothing to say: the first technology came to the library in 1903 when Trustee H. H. Benedict, President of Remington Typewriter Co., gave the library a Remington typewriter for typing catalogue cards, thirty years after typewriters had become available. But these things are always relative: legend has it that the Bodleian Library at Oxford University got its first typewriters in 1957.

The main sources I've exploited for this somewhat impressionistic talk have been the inaugural addresses of the newly-appointed Presidents, the annual reports of the librarians, selected speeches and memos of Trustees, faculty, and friends of the College, the centennial *Documentary History of Hamilton College* (1922), Walter Pilkington's history of the college published in 1962, and John Allan's remarkable 1968 Thesis. What I was seeking was evidence of the administrative values and attitudes which helped shape the library into what it became in the early twentieth century. What I found in the early days of the College was a collective attitudinal ambiguity about the importance of the library to a slowly growing and habitually broke College. There were several tensions involved: a view of some of the Presidents (they were all Reverends during the nineteenth century) that the Bible should be the principal if not the only source of knowledge and the main object of study; prevalent opinions that leisure reading could divert from serious studies and could only serve noxious and gaseous purposes; administrative brinksmanship over the bottomless pit of library expenditures; and a genuine belief that a small, well-selected library was all that was needed. On the other hand throughout the nineteenth century there were sufficient bromides acknowledging the library as the intellectual heart of the institution; sincere appeals from the professors for

growth of scholarly materials for faculty and a wider variety of books for students, materials they thought should be made more accessible than the one hour a week available to the first students of Hamilton College.

When the College was chartered in 1812 it took not only the Principal of Hamilton-Oneida Academy, Seth Norton, as its first Professor of Languages and probably its first librarian, but also the Academy's library: "There are in the Hamilton Onieda Academy 186 volumes well selected. In a private library of the students 37 volumes well selected. Total 223" (Allan, p. 23). Apparently none of this material now remains in the Library today; in fact, at its fifth meeting in Sept. 1813 the Board charged Norton with selecting books from the donations made to the new College, and some may have been discarded in this initial weeding.

The Inaugural Discourse (Dec. 3, 1812) by Rev. Azel Backus, first President of Hamilton College, does not mention libraries, but inferences can be drawn from some of his comments. In addition to excoriating Voltaire for licentiousness and infidelity, declaring Scripture the "perfect map to guide the wayfaring man," his peroration ends with this: "May the Good Lord of our land deliver our youth from that light reading, and gaseous information which require no thinking." This was a motif of the time in other published sermons and tractates, leading to occasional purging of some

of this noxious literature. According to Allan, such a deliverance happened at Hamilton following the Oneida revivals conducted by evangelist Charles Grandison Finney in 1825 and 1826. At that time the collections of the Philoputhean Society (eventually to be merged with the College Library), were cleansed of such pernicious materials as Robert Burns's *Poems*, MacKenzie Williamson's *Man of Feeling*, and Sir Walter Scott's *Red Gauntlet*, a total of 35 volumes (Allan, p. 87). Another cleansing of impure books from the Union Society library occurred in 1838 following the revival preaching of Elder Jacob Knapp, when Fielding, Smollett, and other undesirables were removed. On that occasion the books were auctioned off in the vestibule of the chapel, mainly to members of the Society who the following year returned many of them to the Society's shelves (Allan, p. 93). By this time the amalgamated Union Society had its own reading room, larger collections than the College, and current newspapers and journals, thus making up to its members the deficiencies of the College Library in space, collections, hours of access, and the pernicious light and trivial productions, so much condemned by the preachers of the day (see Nathan Beman, *The Intellectual Position of our Country*, Troy, 1839, p. 20). Ironically, today's honoree's fondest memory of the Hamilton College

Library in the 1940s was of the liberating value of the Leisure Reading Room, which for much of its history was not under library administration.

Returning to the early days of the College, The Board of Trustees recognized the need for library support almost immediately, at its second meeting in November 1812:

“Whereas it is necessary that a small addition be made to the College Library, for the use of the Students: therefore, Resolved, that the sum of one hundred dollars be appropriated for this purpose; & that Mr. Platt, Mr. Williams, & Mr. Kirkland be a committee to procure the same as soon as there shall be sufficient money in the Treasury not otherwise appropriated..., and that the said committee select the books subscribed to the funds of the College; and that the committee appoint a Librarian, and regulate the manner in which the books shall be drawn, until the further order of this Board...”

(Documentary History of Hamilton College, p. 132). In other words, the library might get some funding but would be the last priority to be addressed after all other bills were paid. Some funds did trickle in and by 1814 a scheme to fund College needs through a “Regents Lottery” for the advancement of learning promised \$1500 for library acquisitions. The Lottery was unsuccessful and the limited funds it produced became a subject of dispute with Union College which was not resolved until 1841.

Hamilton College was never rich during the nineteenth century and fund raising sometimes led it onto perilous paths. In 1850 several financial problems including the end of a state subsidy, a deficit budget, and basic capital needs including a larger library caused the Trustees to create an imaginative scheme which nearly bankrupted the college. The plan was to give scholarships to donors of \$100 for limited scholarships (one student for four years) and of \$500 for perpetual scholarships (funding one free student per year in perpetuity). The plan lasted five years and did much harm, since the funds raised were used for operating expenses and not as endowments to cover future costs. Pilkington does note that as late as 1961 the program “continued to inspire the hopes of descendants of the original subscribers” (Pilkington, p. 153-55).

The library grew slowly in its first dozen years, but by 1824 the Board felt the collection adequate enough to justify a printed catalogue, a small pamphlet which was published in January 1826. It listed 1600 titles (1760 volumes) in a topical order starting with Grammars & Rudiments, through Civil History, Biography, Geography, Theology, Poetry, Fiction, Wit and Humor, and ending with Miscellaneous books. Where appropriate, each section was further broken down by language. Each entry provided a shelf number, a very brief author and or title entry, the number of volumes in that

title, and the size of folio, 4to, 8vo, 12mo, or 16mo. Not a date in sight, so it would be very difficult to determine which precise editions of these works were actually held.

But most telling of library circumstances of the time are the appended “Laws of Hamilton College. Of the Library” from which I provide a few extracts:

II. the Librarian’s “duty it shall be to take care of the books belonging to the library and preserve them from loss and injury—to attend at the library room at 12 o’clock on Wednesday of each week during the session for the purpose of receiving and giving out books; and to attend at any other time” that faculty or trustees should wish.

III: “No book shall be taken from the library without the knowledge and presence of the librarian, and no person, except an officer of college, shall have more than three volumes out at a time.”

IV. “No person, except a trustee of the college shall carry a book belonging to the library out of the town of Paris on penalty of being deprived for six months of the privilege of drawing books....”

V. Resident graduates and undergraduates shall pay to the library for the use of each folio volume twelve cents per month; for the use of each quarto volume, eight cents per month; and for each 8vo and smaller volume, four

cents for every two weeks.” The list of fines which follows also distinguishes by size of volumes.

VI. “The faculty have power to designate and retain in the library, such books as...ought not to be loaned.”

VII. Article VII modifies Article V by making the library available to students for fifty cents per session, payable in advance.

VIII. “No student shall take down or put up a book without permission of the librarian.”

IX. “No person shall be admitted to a degree till he shall have produced to the President a certificate from the librarian that he has returned all books taken by him from the library, and from the treasurer that he has paid all charges incurred by the use of them.”

These regulations, modeled on those of Yale University, suggest a College that takes its library very seriously. By contrast to twentieth-century standards, the 1827 library looks depressingly meager. Being librarian was a secondary part-time job, usually for a Professor or instructor, and required little time since library hours were severely limited. Before the publication of the catalogue the librarian’s memory had to serve as the guide to the collection and the student had to ask him whether he had a book in the collection. To be fair, the librarian-professor could well have recommended

books to the students, but the more conventional pedagogy was recitation from given texts. Some of the better books and larger collections on campus were owned by the literary societies but available only to their membership.

Where these limited transactions took place isn't completely clear. The original collection acquired with the Oneida Academy remained in a room in the Academy Building until the College Chapel was finished in 1827. A portion of the third floor of the Chapel was set aside for the growing library but it remained rather inaccessible and thoroughly uncongenial. At Inauguration ceremonies in 1881, the Rev. A. H. Upson reminisced about the College library when he first saw it in 1840, forty years earlier—cold, bare, and dingy: “To find the library, I climbed up into the third story of the chapel, where the little collection of books were mixed with geological and mineralogical specimens. Genesis and geology, if not reconciled, were in close proximity there.”

It seems clear that the College Library muddled along through the 1850s with little sense of urgency. The Presidency of Henry Davis was preoccupied with problems recounted in his *A Narrative of the Embarrassments and Decline of Hamilton College*, completed in 1829 but not published until after his resignation in 1833. Part of the dispute was over the Oneida Revivals and President Davis's opposition to the “new measures”

evangelism, but it extended to issues of salaries, faculty vacancies, declining enrollments, financial management, and discipline. The Library was not one of the burning issues which forced him out of office. His immediate successors had no more to say on the subject than he had, and the library lumbered along at a slow pace until the 1860s.

In 1856 William Curtis Noyes, a New York lawyer and Oneida judge, delivered a commencement address to the graduating law class of the College. In it he railed against indiscriminate reading as opposed to carefully regimented study: “The reading of many books is not essential. A small and well-selected library is better for a young man than a large one. He becomes familiar with its volumes, and loves them as he loves his early friends. His attention and affection are divided and distracted by too large a number of books. The impossibility of mastering them all, tends to a neglect of the most important. Let him confine himself to a chosen few, upon the leading branches of the law....” Above all, he warns students not to go into debt to buy books.

B. F. Skinner’s formula for the library of *Walden Two*, that utopian satire on American society, is almost a paraphrase of Noyes: “As to a library, we pride ourselves on having the best books, if not the most. Have you ever spent much time in a large college library? What trash the librarian

has saved up in order to report a million volumes in the college catalogue! Bound pamphlets, old journals, ancient junk that even the shoddiest secondhand bookstore would clear from its shelves—all saved on the flimsy pretext that some day someone will study the ‘history of a field.’ Here [in *Walden Two*] we have the heart of a great library—not much to please the scholar or specialist, perhaps, but enough to interest the intelligent reader for life. Two or three thousand volumes will do it...”

“The secret is this,” Skinner continued. “We subtract from our shelves as often as we add to them. The result is a collection that never misses fire. We all get something vital every time we take a book from the shelves. If anyone wants to follow a special interest we arrange for loans [Skinner doesn’t say from where]. If anyone wants to browse, we have half a barnful of discarded volumes.” (*Walden Two*, New York, Macmillan, 1976, p. 111-12.) Since Skinner was an Hamilton alumnus (class of 1926) one wonders how his experience here influenced such views.

Apparently that wasn’t really Noyes view. Imagine the surprise of the College when on Noyes’s death in 1865 his library came *in toto* by bequest to Hamilton College, 5000 volumes of law books, and 2000 miscellaneous volumes, all “well-selected.” The addition in 1860 of the libraries of the Union and Phoenix societies in 3000 volumes, and the purchase in 1865 of

the biblical library of Dr. Edward Robinson, forced reconsideration of the library question, the rhetoric changed, and the campaign for a new library began. Thrust forward by the energy of a wealthy alumnus from Chicago, Perry H. Smith, whose \$13,000 gift persuaded other Western alumni to contribute to the building fund, the cornerstone was laid and celebrated in 1866, harbinger of “a fitting repository for the intellectual wealth and experience of the past—a shrine to which the student may come for knowledge, the weary for solace, and the sad for consolation. Let us make it a casket worthy the jewels it is destined to contain....” Former Governor Horatio Seymour described the planned library as “a receptacle of what the great minds of the past has left us.” Two years later, at another presentation ceremony for the still incomplete library, John. Dean Caton, waxed even more hopeful at the ever-receding prospect of the new library: “Here, as to the Mecca of its hopes, will the thoughtful mind, panting for knowledge bend its way; and in its silent alcoves feast upon the lore here treasured.” Whether students would have access to those alcoves was not yet determined, but the question was moot for the next four years until the library was finally completed in 1872.

The administration of this developing library fell to the Rev. Samuel Gilman Brown who was inaugurated as the seventh President of Hamilton

College on July 17, 1867, and the first to speak candidly and forcibly on the need, as for example in his inaugural address: “At the heart of all the intellectual life of the college is the library. If this be meager and insufficient, every department must suffer. The scholar is starveling and hunger bitten. Give to the student on the other hand, an abundance of well chosen books and time to read them, and he absorbs knowledge at every pore. He becomes intelligent almost in spite of himself. He has the means at least of complete and ample intellectual furnishing.

“To the absolute necessity of this ample supply...we have been hardly awake. They [the students] have been required to make brick without straw—to subdue the realms of ignorance without weapons. But I think we see the dawn of a better day.” At last some one was ready to provide the verbal ammunition that the librarian needed, but we should also note that Brown was roundly criticized for making a new Presidential mansion a higher priority than the library during his first two years. This was the period in which the Hamilton chapter of Phi Beta Kappa was founded just two years after the Brown inauguration, and three years before the new library was finally opened.

Students were not hesitant to exercise their satirical bent about the state of the library. The *Hamilton Literary Monthly* for July 1, 1866,

anticipated the new library “with filial joy that we are soon to be released from the mortification, discomfort and positive detriment of mean lodging for the books.” With very slow building progress the students presciently asked, “Is it to be like Solomon’s Temple, seven years in building?” It was! And as to the chapel library books, they were more scathing: “old, antiquated, musty, torn, dog-eared, dry, uninteresting volumes of antediluvian trash. Why don’t somebody present the College or why don’t the College get for itself some decent modern books.” (Allan, p. 181-187).

Finally, the opening of the H. Perry Smith Library in 1872 comes as a turning point in the recognition of the need for growth and for student services, and the Hamilton College Library began to move toward its present role as a modern, technologically adept and bibliographically sophisticated library for the twentieth-first century. It took considerable time for the vision to develop. As far as I can determine, Walter T. Couper in 1892 was the first person assigned full-time to library duties. Dick Couper’s grandfather, a graduate that year, salutarian and Phi Beta Kappa, had duties as cataloger at \$850 per annum plus room, duties he cheerfully accepted for one year before moving on to the faculty to teach Greek and German for the next five.

Walter Couper's period as cataloger and Greek instructor was that of Hamilton's ninth President, Melancthon Woolsey Stryker, surely a powerful and articulate, if authoritarian, leader. His Inaugural plea in 1893 for improved faculty salaries was pointed: "I despise the bland sanctimony which puts 'In God We Trust' upon an alleged dollar which is worth but sixty cents." But he also cited the Library as a major need, "If the ennobling spirit of literature is to brood over the life of yonder hill...." But the faculty response from Dr. W. R. Terwitt is equally telling: "The faculty of the college is not devoured by a desire to have its salaries raised. We shall not object! We thank President Stryker for what he said to-day in our behalf. But there are other things which we desire more. Give us more books in the library, an endowed librarianship, more apparatus...." Most of these things President Stryker, in a long Presidency, helped bring about.

This brings us to the brink of the twentieth century, a period of regular growth and general respect for the Library and its role in the College. And it is there that I desist from closer attention to the recent past. I hope I've presented enough of this Library's history to persuade at least a few of you that the subject is interesting in itself. But we have to ask whether there are any lessons for the present? One inference I draw from your history and many others is that library provision is an easily deferred priority in any

larger institution where each advocate is likely to have other priorities. A corollary is that it takes strong even passionate advocates to keep the vision active and bright. Another, less explicit lesson is that in difficult times of library support, one must do even better with what one has. At Hamilton as everywhere else in higher education today, libraries today are forced to devote more and more financial resources to the leasing of electronic information which will disappear whenever the next inflationary contract goes unsigned. But the tangible assets you have, most notably in rare books and special collections, have equal potential for turning students to the palpable thrills of learning. That is the kind of exploitation which will fully justify your two hundred years of library growth. Thus endeth the lessons of the day.

I hope it was clear from my selections from the archival record, how much I enjoyed the Hamiltonian prose of inaugural ceremonies and other occasions (the poetry was quite another matter). If I may be permitted one more passage, unrelated to libraries but resonant for our times, and especially so in the career of our honoree today, Richard W. Couper, I would like to quote from Chancellor John V. L. Pruyn of the State University of New York, representing the Board of Regents at Hamilton's Semi-Centennial celebrations of 1862:

“But we may inquire whether there be any subject within our range of observation to-day, from the consideration of which we may with our knowledge of the past gain wisdom for the future. One has occurred to me which I think to be of marked importance. It is that the educated, the intelligent men of our country have taken so little interest in its public affairs. The control of government has been given over in a great degree to men of comparatively limited acquirements; to adventurers; to those who have made politics a trade, many of whom have held office only for plunder, and who have sought power only for selfish ends. Had it been otherwise, had the good, the wise and the great taken their full share in our public councils, our present calamities might, and I believe would have been to a great extent avoided. Let then this Institution, let every institution of learning in our land, henceforth impress with more care and earnestness in its teachings, the duty of every man, especially of every educated man, to carry his country near his heart, to take an intelligent and active interest in its affairs, and to give efficient aid in the election to public office of men of character, capacity and integrity.” (p. 123-24).

Chancellor Pruyn then backed up his words with the gift of an endowed prize fund for the best oration by a graduating senior on “The Duties of Educated Young Men to the State,” just as Dick Couper has backed his belief in the Library with the endowed Chair of the Librarian.

Dick, we salute you.