

The Army Medical Library

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Army Medical Library, Washington, D. C.

ON THE SOUTH SIDE OF THE MALL IN Washington, D. C., at the corner of 7th Street and Independence Avenue, next to the Smithsonian Institution, stands an old, red brick building which houses such portions of the Army Medical Library and the Army Institute of Pathology as can be accommodated within its walls (Fig. 1). Since 1836 the Army Medical Library, formerly known as the Surgeon General's Library, has grown from a small collection of books to one of the greatest collections of medical literature in the world. It has grown from a small reference library to a great national research library, known throughout the world both for the size and completeness of its collection and for the printed catalogue of that collection, the *Index-Catalogue*. A famous American physician, the

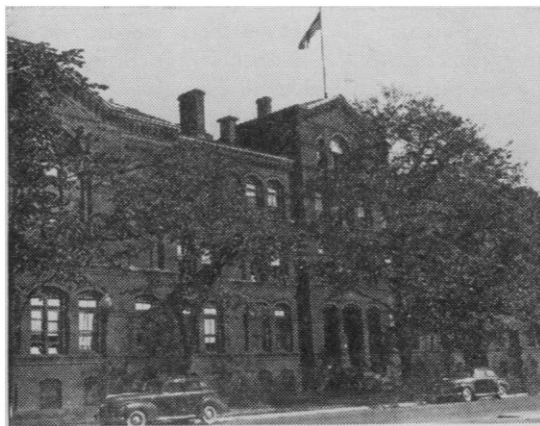


FIG. 1. Present Army Medical Library building, Washington, D. C.

late William H. Welch, once said that the Library and its *Index-Catalogue* were one of America's great contributions to medicine.

This phenomenal growth was almost entirely the result of the vision and efforts of one man, John Shaw Billings, who came to Washington in 1865 to become an assistant to Surg. Gen. Joseph K. Barnes. Dr. Billings seems to have had the ideal personality for the work ahead. He was a man of affairs; he thought and organized far ahead, on broad lines and in many directions, as his output of 171 publications in the course of half a century bears witness. As a bibliographer, he has been compared with Albrecht von Haller of the 18th Century. He also achieved eminence as a vital and medical statistician, serving actively in preparing the reports of the

10th (1880) and 11th (1890) censuses of the United States. In addition, he was often called on for advice on public health matters and the planning of hospitals.

Almost at once Dr. Billings perceived that the accommodations for a library in the Surgeon General's Office were woefully inadequate, that there was a great need for an analytical catalogue of world medical literature, and that to complete such a catalogue a very extensive collection of medical literature must be available in one building. The next 30 years of his life were devoted to the accomplishment of these tasks.

A letter from him to the secretary of the Medical Society of the County of New York, dated February 3, 1880, gives some figures on the extent of the collection at the time of his arrival. In this he wrote: "When the Library came under my charge in the fall of 1865, it contained, as shown by a catalogue made at the time, about 1800 volumes."

In 1868 the sum of \$80,000, remaining from Civil War hospital funds, was made available to Dr. Billings, and he began his great work of collecting and cataloging medical literature. At the time of his departure in 1895, the collection included 310,000 items (117,000 volumes and 193,000 pamphlets).

Through the years the Library's collection has become so large and so well known to the medical profession that its services extend far beyond the Medical Department of the Army. Many related subject fields, such as dentistry, nursing, and veterinary medicine, are represented. The Library also contains a great number of the earliest printed books, pamphlets, and periodicals, including over 500 incunabula.

The collection of early manuscripts from European and Oriental sources and the extensive collection of rare 16th- and 17th-century medical works is of particular interest. A collection of theses published at the University of Paris, considered the most complete in existence, receives constant use. There is also a medical art collection of some 12,000 items, with references to more than 50,000 portraits and illustrations.

The Document Section is attempting to assemble as complete a selection as possible of official health publications of all countries so that vital statistics may be available for any region. Dr. Billings' recognition of the value of statistics had led to an early start of this phase of the collection. The addition in 1922 of a large vital statistics collection of the Prudential Life Insurance Company enhanced the value of these holdings.

Today, under the general directive that "the Library's collections shall contain the medical literature of the world, regardless of language, form, or date of publication," the Acquisition Division shapes its policies to acquire such items as a new medical periodical published in Leningrad, weekly vital statistics from Mozambique, materials on ophthalmology from Egypt, on public health in China, and on tuberculosis in Russia. In all, over 67,000 pieces including books and serials were added to the collections in 1946.

Current medical literature and publications unavailable during the war are being received in increasing quantities. Over 4,500 current serial titles in almost every language are regularly recorded. Through the Library of Congress Cooperative Acquisition Program and the increased acquisition activities of the Library itself during the past two years, it will be possible to provide almost complete coverage of postwar German medical publications and probably 80 per cent of all German medical publications of the war years.

In addition to this global coverage of current medical literature, the Library works constantly to fill any gaps in the basic collection. This continuing enrichment of the collection contributes to the steady growth of the Library's reputation as the finest source of materials for medical history. In all, the Library owns over 1,000,000 items, of which at least 500,000 are bound volumes. There are some 17,500 files of periodical titles.

The servicing of this vast accumulation of medical information is the function of the Library's Reference Division. This service supplies medical publications to the Armed Services, local physicians, institutions, and libraries throughout the country. With these exceptions, the Army Medical Library does not lend books directly to individuals; such loans must be secured through local libraries. To fill requests, large numbers of books are sent out each year on interlibrary loan for a two-week period with renewal privileges. As a service to the research worker, selected bibliographies, either brief or extensive, and covering a wide range of subject matter, are compiled in the Reference Division. Telephone inquiries and letters of great variety are received constantly and are answered as promptly as possible.

Since December 1940 the Army Medical Library has been providing a photoduplication and microfilm service on a global basis in the interest of medical research. This is designed primarily to make available to the personnel of the Medical Department and the medical profession at large the literature of the Library's collections. During World War II millions of pages of microfilmed articles were supplied to the Armed Services and other research agencies. By agreement with the Office of Technical Services, Department of Commerce, the Library is a depository for captured German and Japanese documents on medical subjects, which are available through this photoduplication service. The service is now

generally available to civilian physicians, institutions, and research workers on a cost basis. The charges are nominal. Material so filmed is, of course, not to be used for reproduction without permission of the copyright owner.

The *Index-Catalogue*, a publication which plays a fundamental role in medical research as a subject bibliography and which has become the foundation for medical library service both here and abroad, is a contribution which owes its origin to the vision and energy of John Shaw Billings. In 1876, nine years after assuming charge of the Library, Dr. Billings realized another one of his cherished ambitions with the publication of the "*Specimen Fasciculus*", which was to serve as a pattern for the *Index-Catalogue*. Established by an Act of Congress in 1879, the *Index-Catalogue* is a medicobibliographical survey carried out uninterruptedly by the U. S. Government. The 56 volumes printed to date list 3,282,405 references, 2,796,435 of which are arranged under subjects. The present volume covers the letter M of the Fourth Series. The number of references revealed by both the printed and the manuscript *Index-Catalogue* amounts to almost 5,000,000, all of which are available in the Army Medical Library. The printed edition is found in numerous public and medical libraries and in many cases is used as an index to their own collections.

After the assassination of President Lincoln in 1865, the Library was set up in Ford's Theater on 10th Street, where it remained until Dr. Billings' plans for a new building were realized in 1887. In that year the collection was installed in the building at 7th and B Streets (now Independence Avenue).

By the time Dr. Billings left the Library in 1895 to become director of the New York Public Library, two men selected by him were already carrying forward his work. Fielding Garrison, who retired in 1930 with the rank of Colonel after nearly 40 years of service to the Library, was editor of the *Index-Catalogue*. Robert Fletcher, another Billings appointee, served as editor of the *Index Medicus*, which had been started in 1876. In 1927 this publication merged with the *Quarterly Cumulative Index* of the American Medical Association, becoming the *Quarterly Cumulative Index Medicus*.

From 1895 to 1936, 12 Medical Corps officers served for various periods as librarians. Garrison had this to say of Billings' successors in office:

The official management and administration of the great library, the selection and purchase of its books, the selection of material for indexing, the enlargement and improvement of its resources, passed into the hands of the Army medical officers who succeeded Billings. As the cantors of the Thomasschule at Leipzig, the successors of Bach, had to be men learned in counterpoint, worthy followers of the great seventeenth century music master, so these Army surgeons have been men specially selected for their scientific and literary attainments. Huntington, one of the collaborators of the Medical and

Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion; Merrill, distinguished by his work in ornithology; Walter Reed, a pupil of Welch and discoverer of the causal nexus and mode of transmission of yellow fever; and Walter D. McCaw, who specialized in tropical medicine and added greatly to the unique historical collections of the Library, have all been imbued with the spirit of enthusiasm and the interest in the literary side of medicine which Billings brought into his work.

In 1936 Col. Harold W. Jones became the librarian. Col. Jones served for the next 9 years, including the war period—an important one in the Library's history. The year 1936 also marked the first 100 years of the Library's existence. The centennial was celebrated by a gathering representative of the medical profession and the Army on

Interlibrary loans and reference services were increased, and through the introduction of photoduplication it became possible to provide a world-wide medical information service.

Another Library publication is the *Current List of Medical Literature*, started as a private enterprise in 1941 by Atherton Seidell under the sponsorship of the Medical Library Association. In September 1945, its value having been amply demonstrated, it was taken over as an intra-service publication by the War Department. Published weekly by the Army Medical Library, it is designed primarily to serve the individual engaged in medical research by enabling him to glance each week at the contents of journals in his field and find each month,



FIG. 2. Champier, *De triplici disciplina*, 1508, before restoration.

November 16 of that year. Greetings received from governments and institutions throughout the world bore witness to the position of leadership in its field which the Library had achieved. An article in the January 1937 issue of *The Military Surgeon* describes the gathering which met to do honor on this occasion as "an assemblage of guests, noted in bibliography and medicine and library science, as is seldom beheld."

In the years which followed, particularly those immediately preceding the war period, many changes were made which led to an expansion of the Library's services.

through the subject index, articles published elsewhere on the subjects in which he is interested. It is also designed to be an interim aid to the librarian between appearances of other indexes of more permanent value. The subject headings used are those of the *Quarterly Cumulative Index Medicus*, to which the readers may refer for necessary cross references. The *Current List* is available to personnel and installations of the Medical Corps and Federal agencies on request addressed to the Commandant of the Library.

Overcrowding, as well as lack of air-conditioning, had

taken an irreplaceable toll among the older volumes of the collection through the years. The History of Medicine Division of the Army Medical Library was established in Cleveland in the summer of 1942 to receive and care for a part of the Library's collection which it seemed desirable to place out of probable bombing range and for which there was no longer room in Washington. This included nearly all the Library's books printed before 1801 and much of the noncurrent material in the medical documents and vital statistics collection. A program of repair and rehabilitation of this valuable material has been conducted in this Division (Figs. 2 and 3).

The Library, relying as it did on the printed *Index-Catalogue*, has never had a conventional card catalog of

1946 this new classification was applied for the first time to books currently received.

The cataloging and classifying of the million titles in the Library will be a stupendous task; no other major research library has undertaken such an extensive reorganization. Upon completion of the work, which will require 10–15 years, the Library will be able to provide finger-tip control over the medical literature in its possession.

Early in 1943 a committee of leading civilian authorities, sponsored by the American Library Association and financed by the Rockefeller Foundation, conducted an intensive survey of the Library and its activities and presented a series of recommendations of a sufficiently

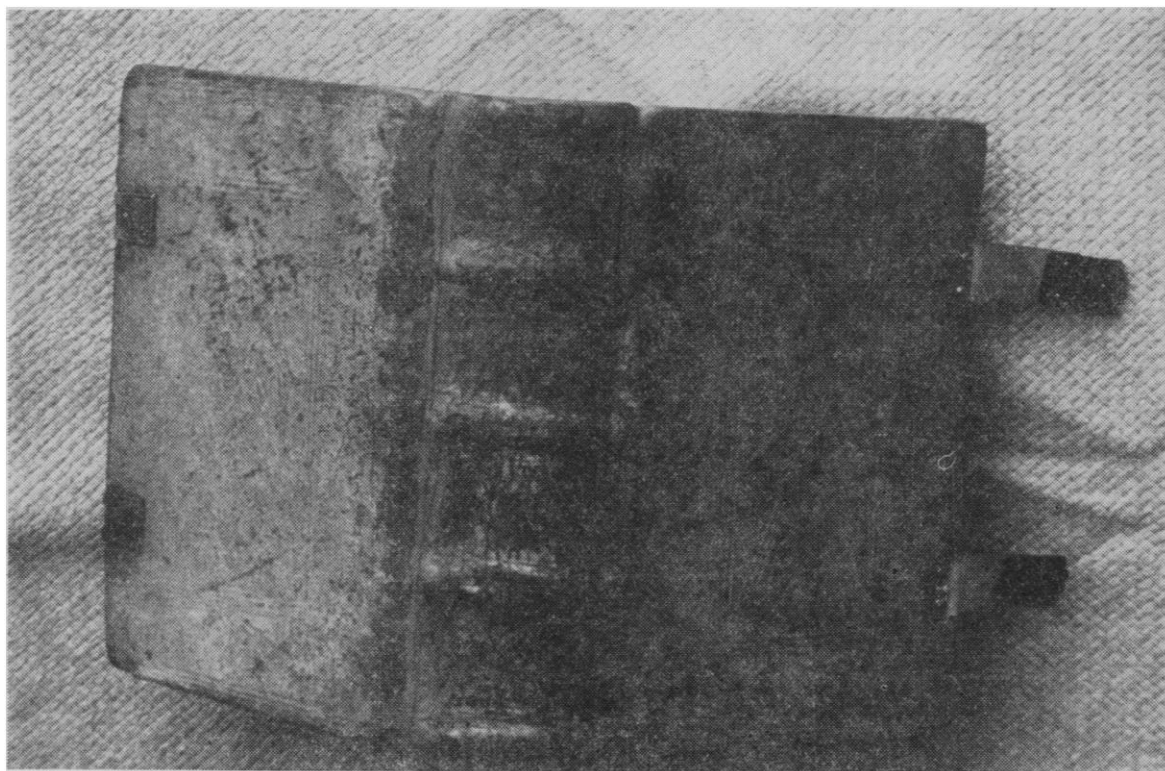


FIG. 3. Champier, *De triplici disciplina*, 1508, after restoration.

its holdings. In 1944–46 an inventory was made on cards as a preliminary to a complete card catalog. In March 1946 permanent descriptive cataloging of the collections was begun.

There has been no classification subject groupings other than alphabetical arrangements under broad subject groupings. This deficiency, which had resulted in great handicaps to public service, was recognized early in the war. As there was no existing classification adequate for the collection, a new classification for medical literature was prepared by a committee of advisers. In October

long-range character to offer a reorganization suited to future needs. Most pressing among these was the need for a new building to replace the present cramped quarters, occupied by the Library in Washington since 1887. The committee also stressed the importance of building up a professional staff with a modern library organization through which it could function. Since 1943 the staff has been increased from 58 to 128. Through its professional training and abilities it is a credit to a great institution.

The recommendation of the Survey Committee that a new building was an absolute necessity has yet to become

an accomplished fact. In 1940 the sum of \$130,000 was appropriated for plans. After extensive consultations with the librarian and an advisory board of medical officers, blueprints and artists' drawings were made by the architects, Eggers and Higgins of New York, who spent approximately a year in developing the general plans (Fig. 4). The advent of World War II resulted in

the resources of the Library will be accessible to scholars from all parts of the world.

The Association of Honorary Consultants to the Army Medical Library, an organization which is an outgrowth of an advisory board of outstanding physicians and librarians appointed by Surg. Gen. Patterson in 1931, acts as an advisory body to the Surgeon General on



FIG. 4. Proposed Army Medical Library building (architects' drawing).

postponement of all activity leading toward the immediate erection of a new building. However, in anticipation of eventual action which will provide for the essential needs of the Library, further study has been given to the original drawings. The Library looks forward to the time when a building can be secured which will not only be adequate for present needs but which will anticipate the growth of the collection. The location has been selected, adjoining the Library of Congress on Capitol Hill, where

library matters. This Association, the current president of which is John Fulton, professor of physiology at Yale University, is most active in support of the Library.

Through a close working arrangement with the Library of Congress and other Federal research libraries in Washington, the Army Medical Library is able to offer almost unlimited resources in its field. This great medical research library must continue to build and interpret its collection in support of medical progress.

