

*The Institutional Mind:  
Independent Research Libraries,  
Learned Societies,  
and the Humanities in the United States*

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**M**Y ASSIGNED TOPIC is the institutional mind: the history of learned societies, independent research libraries and the humanities in the United States. The subject is peculiarly appropriate on this important anniversary of the American Antiquarian Society, since the AAS is one of the two ancient American institutions (both founding members of the American Council of Learned Societies) to function both as learned societies and independent research libraries. It is, uniquely, the oldest such institution exclusively devoted to the humanities. The occasion is celebratory, and so I will attempt to trace the historic significance of independent research libraries and learned societies, but it is also a moment for conversation with a distinguished audience, and so I will attempt to give my sense of the ways in which our mission remains dangerously incomplete.

The institutional structure of the humanities has become, with the passage of the last two hundred years, increasingly complex

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and problematic. It is not even possible to offer a definition of 'the humanities' consistent throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For more than fifty years after the founding of the American Antiquarian Society, Americans would have understood by the term 'humanities' the traditional collegiate curriculum of Greek, Latin, moral theology, and mathematics. American education and cultural life were still essentially dominated by the old notions of the trivium and quadrivium. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, however, when the emergence of modern scholarship began to revolutionize the content of the undergraduate curriculum, a contest over the meaning of the concept emerged. As academic departments embodying the scientific aspirations of the new disciplines fragmented university faculties, a rift appeared between those professors and amateurs who espoused the broad, traditional definition of the humanities and those more professional, institutional scholars who were forging narrower, more scientific and more methodologically oriented definitions of the particular fields in which they worked.

The traditionalists saw the conflict in apocalyptic terms. One Ivy League professor of Greek maintained, for instance, that the conflict was 'more than an academic question, it is in the last analysis an issue of civilization.'<sup>1</sup> The traditionalists stressed this identification of the humanities and 'civilization,' pointing in particular to the Graeco-Roman origins of Anglo-American culture and the responsibility of the scholar to keep the candle of that culture lit as the guiding beacon of American society. This viewpoint has of course periodically reemerged in the United States, championed by scholars as different as Irving Babbitt and Allan Bloom, but by the early part of the twentieth century the specialist humanists had taken control of the humanities curriculum in the universities and most other cultural institutions. For them, however, the term had no larger sociopolitical connotation and they

1. Irving Manatt, March 1903, as quoted by Laurence Veysey, 'The Plural Organized Worlds of the Humanities,' in Alexandra Oleson and John Voss, eds., *The Organization Of Knowledge In Modern America, 1860-1920* (Washington, D.C., 1979), p. 55.

spoke and acted for their own disciplines rather than for 'the humanities' as a whole.

I am inclined to agree with Laurence Veysey that it was not really until the Social Science Research Council seceded from the American Council of Learned Societies in 1923, flaunting the banner of science, that a new configuration began to take shape. This, ironically, was a process that can be likened to the Federalists' stigmatization of their 1787 opponents as 'Anti-Federalists.' By the late 1920s the humanities were those subjects that were 'not scientific,' were those ACLS member societies who had not transferred allegiance to SSRC. As Veysey remarked: 'In this chronology there is the interesting implication that "the humanities," in their modern meaning of a concrete grouping of academic disciplines rather than their older meaning of classical language study, took on a more or less clear shape *after* the self-conscious arrival of the social sciences, not before.'<sup>2</sup> This, alas, is still more or less our modern predicament. Academics tend to think of the humanities as those fields (other than those of the 1923 secessionists) called to membership in ACLS. Not only does this definition tend to exclude the arts, but it is one almost totally devoid of any affirmative definitional content. The consequences of this situation are, as we shall see later, real and troublesome.

Before trying to find what I see as the problems in our situation, however, permit me a brief tour d'horizon of the history of our institutional development. In the first period, that is, until about 1880, the humanities (in their original sense) were the core of American education. Instruction in ancient languages and study of classical texts were the focus of higher education, such as it existed in American colleges. Scholarship, however, was not so much the preserve of academics as of the learned in society, the 'gentleman scholar' being the rule rather than the exception. The aims of these men (and a few women) were fairly comprehended in the purpose that Isaiah Thomas set forth for the American Antiquarian Society in 1812: 'To enlarge the sphere of human

2. Veysey, 'Worlds of the Humanities,' p. 57.

knowledge, aid the progress of science, to perpetuate the history of moral and political events, and to improve and instruct posterity.<sup>3</sup> The AAS, like the eighteenth-century American Philosophical Society, served such a clientele, and did so in a critically important way.

The 'old' humanities were based upon a reverence for the past, and one of the crucial tasks for American humanists was to discover the peculiar relationship of the United States to the classical Great Tradition. In order to do so, Americans had not only to investigate their past (and this could be done nowhere so well as here in Worcester) but also to create that past. Heroes had to be discovered and values specified so that the larger American public in a culturally threatened democratic society could be educated to a proper set of civic values. For this reason, American history came to take its place alongside the study of the classics as the mainstream of humanistic scholarship. Colleges, the handful of existing learned societies (defined regionally and socially rather than disciplinarily), local historical societies, athenaeums, and museums were the institutions upon which the humanities depended during the first century of our national existence. The humanities were classical, elite, and, more than anything else, local.

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, however, the winds of change began to blow at hurricane force. The driving impulse was that of modern science as expressed in Germanic conceptions of research in the newly rationalized university: 'To the generalists, research meant submergence in arcane dry-as-dust materials located within subfields they could scarcely comprehend, along with the acceptance of dubious and pretentious scientific posture. The Ph.D. and the entire Germanic style of graduate training threatened liberal education.'<sup>4</sup> The elective system took over the collegiate curriculum, just as the graduate seminar dominated postgraduate training, and the Ph.D. came to be the *laissez passer* of intellectual life. Modern disciplines appeared, along with

3. *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society, 1812-49* (Worcester, 1912), p. 3.

4. Veysey, 'Worlds of the Humanities,' p. 54.

national, professional, learned societies to guard their borders. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the appearance of the American Historical Association, the American Philological Association, the Modern Language Association, and many other of the largest modern learned societies.

But now 'learned' did not mean 'humane' so much as professional—the product of rigorous graduate training in doctoral research programs, policed both by universities and by national disciplinary societies. Academic humanists came to dominate the field, nearly to the exclusion of the amateur, and the university moved to the center of American intellectual life. Within the universities, academic departments emerged as the principal sociological *and* intellectual structure, in ways that affected not only faculty but students. The choice of a 'major' came to dominate the baccalaureate, just as one's departmental colleagues came to dominate faculty life. The institutional accoutrements of this development were scientific laboratories and university research libraries, while, outside the university, national professional societies, independent research libraries, research museums, and learned journals complemented the growth of modern scholarship.

One important consequence of the move toward professionalization and specialization was the burgeoning nationalization of intellectual life. In addition to the learned societies, a number of novel national organizations emerged as attempts were made to lend system to the chaotic proliferation of scholarly effort: the National Academy of Art (1892), the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1898), the American Federation of Arts (1909). None of these had the desired unifying effect, and most attempts to create something like a National Academy for the humanities (not to mention the 1890s movement to establish a national university in Washington) came to naught. The problem was primarily the persistent localism of American culture and education, in the context of a federal constitutional system that systematically denied to the national government the capacity to determine cultural norms. As a future leader of ACLS observed of American learned

organizations in 1909: 'A striking difference between the foreign society and those of America is the greater part played by the national Governments in their direction. In wealth and membership the American societies are perhaps rather better off than those of Europe, but in the production of useful material systematically planned and edited with a high degree of scholarship they are undoubtedly far behind.'<sup>5</sup> The American Council of Learned Societies (founded in 1919) was probably the most successful of these efforts, but it must be said that it originally aimed to achieve American representation in the international humanities world, and, in any case, 'it acted as the servant of its component scholarly organizations, not as their director or master.'<sup>6</sup>

By 1920, American libraries had succeeded in purchasing many of the printed and manuscript treasures of their European counterparts, just as American museums had done with Old World painting and sculpture, but at this point the absence of nationally-funded cultural institutions and the newness of the American university system rendered the state of the newly emergent humanities disciplines in the United States very weak in comparison to those of Europe. Still, the period from 1890 to 1920 was one of enormous growth for the learned societies and also for the independent research libraries. The private research libraries that had originated in the colonial period and in the earlier nineteenth century were associational, membership organizations that embodied broad contemporary cultural ideals. They were founded by men, like Benjamin Franklin and Isaiah Thomas, in the trade, who had already spent a considerable portion of their lives finding out what was available, and earning the money to obtain it.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, witnessed the emergence of new libraries founded quite differently. Such institutions as the Newberry, Crerar, Huntington, Morgan, and Folger libraries were the philanthropic creations of

5. Waldo Gifford Leland, *Annual Report* (Washington, D.C., 1909) of the American Historical Association, p. 31, as quoted in Veysey, 'Worlds of the Humanities,' p. 90.

6. Veysey, 'Worlds of the Humanities,' p. 68.

wealthy businessmen, some of whom were not themselves either intellectuals or book collectors. These libraries were founded to serve as specialized research collections, sometimes without any very clear intellectual focus. They tended to grow in accordance with the availability of manuscript and book collections for purchase, the tastes of their directors and boards of trustees, or chance donations. They gradually became the homes of intense modern scholarly activity, superintended by scholar-librarians, loosely watched over by socially-elite trustees whose principal responsibilities were fiduciary. They were, and are, a nearly unique American phenomenon, their roles in Europe being played either by the great national or private aristocratic research collections. As Louis B. Wright once put it: 'When a member of a visiting group of English scholars once grouched that certain books in the Folger Library "ought never to have been allowed out of the county," he was silenced by a wise colleague. "If these books had remained in some English country house, you would never have had access to them . . . or they might just have rotted away."'<sup>7</sup>

Even the older independent research libraries in the United States, the APS and AAS, accommodated themselves to the newer form. The Antiquarian Society closed its museum in 1908, and both the Philosophical Society and the Antiquarian Society increasingly rationalized (that is specialized) their collections after the turn of the century. Thus libraries, learned societies, and universities all tended toward the newer, professionalized, and specialized model of humanities research. As Wright observed, even with these advances, the humanist remained in a difficult position: 'How humanists can make the best use of the enormous resources of the great research libraries is a problem for them. . . . Scientists have a less complex approach. Their data are more finite, more easily codified, and more susceptible of revelation by machines. Frequently the poor humanist, with vaguer objectives, finds himself floundering in the Slough of Despond, without a paddle or

7. Louis B. Wright, *Our Cultural Heritage: Whence Salvation?* (Addresses delivered at the 89th Membership Meeting of the Association of Research Libraries, 1976), p. 10.

pole to push him through the morass of preserved data that our greatest research libraries feel impelled to preserve.<sup>8</sup>

The modern period, since about 1920, has witnessed intensification of these tendencies. The fields of the humanities, as I have already suggested, became differentiated from those in the social sciences after the mid-1920s, but the fields themselves continued to proliferate through a process of subdivision. This specialization continues apace, to the concern of many. History, for instance, has become divided according to sub- or interdisciplinary categories (legal history, urban history, architectural history), geographical divisions, and chronological divisions, almost all of which now boast their own professional societies. For many contemporary humanists, subdisciplinary meetings have become intellectually more significant and attractive than meetings of the older comprehensive societies (such as the American Historical Association).

Both the university research libraries and the independent research libraries have continued along the road begun at the turn of the century. While the independent libraries have not greatly increased in number, they have made tremendous strides in their collecting practices, technical services, physical collections, and accessibility to the broader scholarly community. Perhaps most significantly, they have become university-like centers of scholarship by offering fellowships to attend seminars in subjects based on their collecting strengths. They have also engaged in impressive publication projects, organized themselves nationally into the Independent Research Library Association, and in general gone a long way down the road to professionalization.

The university research libraries have, needless to say, made tremendous strides. The Americans here followed a German model begun as early as 1737 in Gottingen, a system of 'research and research librarianship derived from the neo-Aristotelian and post-Cartesian remarriage of philosophy, scholarship and political

8. Wright, *Our Cultural Heritage*, p. 11.

organization proposed by Leibniz.<sup>9</sup> American research libraries have become bigger, richer, better organized, more accessible, and well on the way to being nationally linked electronically. It is also worth noting that the Library of Congress has made progress in integrating itself into this national bibliographic system. All of this has occurred during an era in which both the number of practicing humanists and the quantity of humanistic scholarship increased exponentially (thanks in no small part to the emergence of the university presses as the principal mode of scholarly communication).

Perhaps the most staggering change for the humanities has been in the sphere of funding. Individual donors have made remarkable contributions, ranging from the establishment of independent research libraries and museums to the endowment of chairs for university professors. Without such individual support, humanistic scholarship in the United States could not have gained the international reputation that it now enjoys.

From the early 1920s on, philanthropic foundations were a vital force in directing and sustaining the humanities, both within and without the universities. But even more important, quite clearly, has been the emergence (particularly in the past twenty years) of the federal government as a major source of largesse. With the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities in 1965, along with a number of other federal programs that have a less direct but equally crucial impact on humanities scholarship, the federal government has begun to play a major and unforeseen role. From an international point of view, the most remarkable part about this development is the benignness of governmental intervention. Despite fears to the contrary, we have not developed a ministry of culture, and, on the whole, government agencies have respected the peer review process, which guarantees that the judgment of the community of scholars will be a determin-

9. I. R. Willison, *On the History of Librarians and Scholarship*, (Washington, D.C., 1980), p. 10.

ing factor in the application of public funds. Vigilance will remain the appropriate stance for the humanities community, but it would be churlish not to acknowledge the remarkably productive impact of federal intervention in the life of humanities scholarship and upon the performing arts.

A final factor that needs to be noted is the increasing internationalization of humanities scholarship. As Americans have become more specialized and better organized nationally, so we have begun to play a significant role in international scholarship, both as individuals and as organizations. Each one of the major learned societies participates in the international humanities organization in its field, as do the major library associations. American scholars lecture and publish abroad, just as foreigners lecture and publish in the United States. There is probably not a single field defined as humanities in the United States that has not both made a significant contribution internationally or been seriously influenced by international scholarship. This is true even in the necessary parochialism of my own field, American studies.

Little has been done to redefine the 'humanities' in the last half-century, leaving us with the post-SSRC negative definition. Over the past twenty years or so, however, there has at least been a salutary countermovement, as humanities scholarship, especially historical scholarship, influenced the development of the social sciences. The reverse is, of course, also the case, to the point where many of us can no longer clearly identify ourselves as humanists rather than social scientists. Today, a social historian is the president of ACLS and a political historian the president of SSRC. Perhaps confusion in some matters is not a bad thing.

Which is not to say that there are no problems in our midst or on the horizon. The purpose of anniversary speeches is, after all, first to celebrate — and then to warn. What are some of the current and foreseeable problems for learned societies, independent research libraries, and the humanities? Let me first mention three continuing problems.

1. From the time of the establishment of this great Society, the

antagonism between elitism and republican egalitarianism has been a source of tension. The conflict is obvious, but it bears repeated analysis. The American Antiquarian Society, unlike more recent learned societies, has a self-perpetuating elected membership (as does the American Philosophical Society). These are perhaps more typical of the pre-democratic age in which they were established, and of course almost all of the learned societies established since the late nineteenth century are on a completely open membership basis. But the quality of humanistic scholarship rather than membership is the critical issue in the humanities. And the criteria for assessing that quality are in some ways controversial.

As we have moved to the professionalization of the humanities, notions of peer review (for academic tenure, publication, funding) have become dominant in the establishment of evaluative criteria and, on the whole, have worked well. Needless to say, however, the efficacy of 'peer' review depends upon one's definition of 'peer.' As the humanities community has been expanded from one of elite, white, Protestant males to one more nearly reflective of the heterogeneity of American society, we have become considerably less certain about appropriate standards. This is true not only of individuals but also of subjects, since the traditional definitions of the humanities derived from the presumed continuity of the European and Anglo-American historical experience. How the traditions of Asia, Africa and other culturally autonomous regions relate to the Great Tradition is a hotly contested issue.

Likewise, issues of the governance of humanities institutions, the openness of those institutions, and the range of appropriate humanistic purposes are now debatable in a way that they never were before. Just how far we have come is indicated in a story told by George Parker Winship at the opening of the Clements Library in Ann Arbor nearly sixty years ago. Winship, the distinguished librarian of the John Carter Brown, recalled an undergraduate visitor to the JCB who was so impressed by the furnishings of the library that he brought his bride to Providence to see the furniture he wanted to have in their home, and to experience 'the sort of

things he wanted their children to grow up to appreciate as an essential part of the natural surroundings of a college-bred family': 'It seemed to me then, and it seems to me now, that the John Carter Brown Library did one of the best things it could do for college undergraduates when it gave that boy a realization of the physical refinements which have so much to do with making life not only pleasanter, but actually, literally better. And it is this that I expect the Clements Library to do for Michigan.'<sup>10</sup> It is, blessedly, hard to imagine Marcus McCorison making such a remark today.

2. A second continuing problem is the conflict between spontaneity and planning. The humanities tradition in the United States is one that I would call essentially serendipitous. 'Let a thousand humanists bloom' seems to be the general rule. Not that we have taken this entirely seriously, since the very notion of professionalization implies the development of standards and, thereby, of quality control. Yet it remains true that our strongly localist traditions have, historically, encouraged a proliferation of widely dispersed centers of scholarly, library, and learned excellence. We have until fairly recently resisted efforts at coordination and planning. Our traditions significantly differ from the statist, centralized practices of Europe, but a variety of emergent and pressing problems in the humanities make some higher level of planning and coordination essential, and probably inevitable.

Wherever one looks, from shortages in private funding (and the increasing prominence of centralized federal funding) to the preservation of embrittled books, much less the need to rationalize both publication and collection of books and journals, it is clear that we have national imperatives for rational cooperation. Our historic mode has been to think of local or regional centers of excellence as models or pace-setters, and we are now struggling to adjust to the rapidly emerging pressures for centralized authority, whether they come from NEH, the Library of Congress, the Research Libraries Group, or elsewhere. The balance between

10. George Parker Winship, 'Remarks,' in *The Whys and Wherefores of The William L. Clements Library* (Ann Arbor, 1930), p. 23.

initiative and cooperation, between individualism and organization, between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* is surely a central humanistic concern.

3. Third, the humanities have always been at risk financially, but the modernization and professionalization of the field have placed us in a peculiarly exposed position. We have clearly gone from an era in which self-support and Croesus-like benevolence could sustain us, to a period in which neither individual scholarship nor humanities institutions can flourish independent of state and federal public policy. We have become dependent not only upon direct federal funding through such organizations as NEA, NEH, and state arts councils, but we are also at risk through political determinations of federal tax policy (as the independent research libraries discovered to their horror twenty years ago) and other forms of public regulation. Our institutions are now large and various, our numbers have grown, and we do not have sufficient resources to sustain them.

Perhaps the single most important encouragement to scholarship in the United States since 1900 has been the emergence of the philanthropic foundation, and the humanities have benefited substantially from foundation philanthropy. Many foundations have contributed to our efforts, and many continue to do so. Still, it is worth saying that of all of the large national foundations only the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation is primarily devoted to general funding in the humanities, and only a few (principally the Getty) are dedicated to the arts. In government, it hardly needs saying that the generous support given through NEH and NEA pales in comparison to support given to the natural sciences through the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, and the other federal agencies that invest in scientific research. There is doubtless some measure by which we are not so important in public policy as a cure for cancer, traveling to Mars, or building a doomsday machine, but we must find a way of making it clear that we are crucial to the proper development of American society. We may laugh when senators stigmatize arcane research as deserv-

ing of the Golden Fleece award, but we had better cry when we realize that those same people might not recognize the name of Jason.

Which leads me to my final and most important subject, the relationship of the health of the humanities to that of American society generally. As I tried to indicate at the beginning of this talk, the relationship of the humanities to the polity has been a contested issue at least since the Gilded Age. It was then, as I have said, that traditional humanists lashed out at the scientific, particularistic pretensions of the newer research scholars, insisting that the true role of the humanities was to preserve the values of the past. Quoting Laurence Veysey again, these scholars:

identified with the term "culture," resisted the new tendencies toward specialization and scientific imagery. Composed of classicists and a fraction of men from such fields as English literature and the history of art, and further able to count upon philosophical idealists as somewhat standoffish allies, the advocates of culture espoused the values of the older college-trained elite, though updating these values away from a defensive Christian orthodoxy. In their view, the main aim of education continued to be the training of future leaders for the whole society, directly inculcating them with a moral viewpoint that sought to rise above materialism. . . . From within the universities they preached the same gospel of civilization as did their friends who upheld the so-called genteel tradition on the outside.<sup>11</sup>

Such voices were again heard in the 1920s, and in the 1940s—and they dominated the best-seller list in the summer of 1987. In different ways, both E. D. Hirsch and Allan Bloom represent these older ideals, and many other prominent voices currently echo their sentiments.

The challenge of what perhaps might be called the traditional humanist stance is the same today as it was in the 1890s or 1920s: research scholars have disassociated themselves from the essentially moral enterprise of the humanities and in so doing have abandoned the essential task of public education, the inculcation

11. Veysey, 'Worlds of the Humanities,' p. 53.

of traditional moral and political values in the young. These values, then as now, are taken to be those implicit in the Great Tradition, and as embodied in the American heroes whom we are urgently called upon to respect. In a recent public discussion, Professor Hirsch has gone so far as to call for the retelling of the cherry tree story when teaching about George Washington. This is to say that the elitism and conservatism that always lurks just below the surface of the traditional humanist stance once again reasserted themselves and must be contended with openly and honestly. The time for another national debate on the humanities is at hand.

The traditionalists, with whom I hope it is clear I do not agree, remind us at least of one terribly important attribute of the humanistic enterprise—the responsibility of the humanities scholar to the larger public. It was perhaps possible for the humanists of the early twentieth century to think of themselves purely as scientists and as committed only to their craft, but I for one agree with the traditionalists that that is no longer the case (if it ever was). The twin facts that we are mostly academics, and therefore teachers, and that we are increasingly supported by public funds means that we must attend to our larger audience. We owe it attention not only because it feeds us, but more importantly because one essential purpose of the humanities enterprise (unless we truly have become scientists) is to clarify public values. If we abandon that task, we risk becoming antiquarians, and we are less deserving of public support.

Perceptive humanists have taken this point for many years. At the dedication of the John Carter Brown Library, Frederick Jackson Turner safely praised a wealthy donor for investing in historical scholarship, proclaiming that ‘every gift that promotes historical study is an additional safeguard for conservatism and wisdom in dealing with the complex problems that are presenting themselves to the twentieth century’ for ‘history is the minister of conservative reform.’ That might surprise my colleagues who think of Turner as the apostle of Western democracy, but he went on more characteristically to contend that ‘the ideals of a commu-

nity shall dominate its material prosperity.<sup>12</sup> His point was, of course, that humanities scholarship would enable American society to identify its ideals.

It is not my task today, nor would this be the appropriate place, to offer my own solutions to these problems. Suffice it to say that they are real and pressing, and that we ignore them at our peril. What has seemed clearest to me in preparing these remarks is that the greatest crisis facing the humanities community today is one of leadership. There may have been a time in the last century when the social position of humanists and the relative size of their community made it possible for them to speak with something like unified force. Today that is hardly the case. The humanities contain so many mansions, and those mansions mansions, that we can hardly comprehend the larger contours of the field. The institutional structure of the community is so complex that we have trouble identifying its components, much less communicating among them. The sociological, political, and intellectual character of the community is so diverse as to make discourse, much less agreement, difficult to achieve. And, as I have already said, most of this diversity is probably a good thing.

We operate in an environment in which individual institutions are so intricately constructed and hard-pressed (especially financially), that their leaders must exhaust themselves in the task of institutional self-preservation. There is no humanities leadership in the federal government, nor do we desire any. We find little guidance in the private foundation community, nor in most other of our great cultural institutions, though here and there a solitary giant of the proportions of Jack Sawyer or Vartan Gregorian emerges. We need, I think, to find ways to use some of the great humanities institutions that we are celebrating today to provide leadership, to stimulate discussion of the hard problems that confront us, and to take action. Until we do, we will be an increasingly endangered species, condemned by our narcissism to deserved public neglect.

12. Frederick Jackson Turner, 'Address' in [John Carter Brown Library,] *The Rededication of the Library Building* (Providence, 1905), p. 57.

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