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# Looking Back: State Librarian's 1889 Report to Governor Simon B. Buckner

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## **Looking Back: State Librarian's 1889 Report to Governor Simon B. Buckner Jonathan Jeffrey**

Governor Simon Bolivar Buckner appointed Ed Porter Thompson to serve as State Librarian and Superintendent of Public Property in October 1888. He continued in that position until March 1890 when Buckner asked him to become his private secretary. Below is the transcription of a section of the *Report of the Librarian and Superintendent of Public Property*, 1889 (Frankfort, Ky.: E. Polk Johnson, 1889) related to the state library. The State Librarian had responsibility for the library located in the state capitol; he had numerous other duties as the Superintendent of Public Property. The latter job included responsibility for the state buildings in Frankfort's public square as well as the Governor's Mansion. In his report on public properties, Thompson claimed that his signal achievement as Superintendent was the construction of "water closets" in the basement of the old state office building. This allowed Thompson to raze the older building that housed those foul facilities. According to Thompson, the old facilities were "a standing menace to health; a stench in the nostrils and offense to the eye of citizens, sojourners and strangers; an indignity to the representatives and officers of the people, and a disgrace to the State." The Librarian's comments on space limitations and niggardly resources are not unfamiliar to current librarians.

Mr. Thompson was born on 6 May 1834 in Metcalfe County. He was the oldest of five children born to Lewis and Mary Thompson. Lewis died when Ed was only twelve. From the age of nineteen until the outbreak of the Civil War, Ed taught school in order to support his mother and siblings. Thompson, a Confederate, served ably in Company F of the Sixth Kentucky Regiment. He was wounded at Shiloh and held briefly as a prisoner

of war at City Point, Virginia. After the war he worked for newspapers in Kentucky and Arkansas.

Thompson continued his public service when he was elected Superintendent of Public Instruction in 1891, a position he held for four years. When free from his administrative duties, Thompson wrote several textbooks and history tomes. The most noted is *A History of the First Kentucky Brigade* (1868) which was later reproduced as *A History of the Orphan Brigade* (1898). Mr. Porter died on 4 March 1903 in Frankfort and is buried in that city's cemetery. In Thompson's honor, the flag on the Capitol was flown at half-mast, "and the State offices," noted an obituary, "were closed to allow all the public officials to pay respect to the remains of the wounded soldier, who, though gashed with shot and saber, in the 'Lost Cause,' gallantly fought the battle of life to the last."

#### The Library

"The catalogue of books, which has been current with slight biennial modifications for fourteen years, was of no service whatever to me in my effort to ascertain the number and character of publications on hand, and it soon became clear that a wholly new catalogue was absolutely necessary. The making of this involved preparations for shelving many thousands of books and the classifying of almost the entire collection. In addition to the books stored in closets unsuited to either their preservation or use, and piled on floors of vacant rooms, the shelves of the Law Library were so crowded that it was impossible to find space for new books received in the way of purchase and exchange. Three rooms in the upper story of the old Capitol were supplied with plain shelving put against the walls, and in double row across each floor; the gallery of the new Senate Chamber was re-arranged and made available for handling,

placing and afterward finding, without inconvenience, the books there, while seven apartments of the basement of the office building were cleared of coal, wood, old furniture and miscellaneous *debris*, floors laid and shelving went up. Much old furniture was utilized in the course of the work.

The Law Library was then overhauled and everything not in current use removed to appropriate places. Books and pamphlets were now classified throughout and put in position--the listing of them going on meanwhile. These now occupy about twenty rooms in three buildings, and number between seventy-five and eighty thousand. It is obvious that the making of a catalogue, with any attempt at classification, involved the carrying and re-carrying of thousands of volumes from room to room about the square, and handling them over and over again.

The Collins Library consists of about two thousand six hundred bound and unbound volumes, besides a vast collection of scraps and miscellaneous newspaper files, that were formerly the property of the Historian of Kentucky, Richard H. Collins. It was bought last April, from Col. Reuben T. Durrett, under advice and consent of the Library Board, chiefly from the fact that it contains a large number of publications relating to Kentucky and Kentuckians--many of them rare; and forms an admirable nucleus for a collection of books, manuscripts, etc., touching the history and literature of the State. It is kept intact in a room finished and fitted up, as per your order and it is borne on the catalogue as a separate branch of the State Library. A fine portrait of the historian and valuable maps form part of the collection and occupy places on the walls of that room. The Historical Society Collection, of which I took charge under your orders of March 25<sup>th</sup> and April 24<sup>th</sup>, is also catalogued separately and is kept in the room formerly set

apart for the Society. (The orders referred to are borne upon a circular letter published to correct misapprehension on the part of donors and others, a copy of which is handed you herewith, marked "A," and the inventory of the furniture, paintings, books, manuscripts, and other property is on file in the office of the Secretary of State).

It is perhaps pertinent to recapitulate at this point some facts as to the condition for the Library, which I have communicated to you orally at different times. The law contemplates that fifty sets of the Acts of Assembly shall be kept in the Capitol besides a certain number to be at the disposal of the two Houses while in session. I endeavored to make up these sets, but found that the books were not in stock to make a single complete one. The only set now in possession of the State composed of original publications is in the Collins Library. Littell's Laws, however in five volumes, comprise all the acts, classified from 1792 to 1817, and with these I began. But after making up a few sets, these were exhausted, and the sessions from 1817 for which there were no copies on hand so multiplied that I put in place but twenty-four, and several of these are but skeleton sets.

It is further contemplated that Journals of both Houses shall be kept to the number of twenty-five sets. The legislative documents, in bound volumes, are so important in some respects as to require that a considerable number of them should have been kept from the first. Of the former we have scarcely any of earlier date than 1825, and of the latter none earlier than 1837--few of earlier date than 1839-40. These bound documents contain the original and only complete legislative, and much of the executive, history of the State; and it will be observed that almost all such history for the first forty-eight years of the Commonwealth is missing. Further the required number of Supreme Court Reports was not full, except as to three of the first seventy-seven volumes, the missing copies

amounting to three or four hundred books. These grow more rare, and of course increase in price from year to year, and it will not be long before it is impossible to obtain them.

This was also the case with certain Codes, Digests, General Statutes, etc. On the other hand there were found to be in stock more than twenty-five thousand surplus, but more or less valuable, bound books (not reckoning many to be found in the Law Library), besides more than ten thousand books and pamphlets which were published, through the long series of years, for general distribution by the heads of departments, and not considered as having money value

Upon communicating these facts to the Library Board it was agreed that the sets of reports, session laws, etc., ought to be made up by purchase and exchanged; and I had to order under Sec. 4, Art. 2, Chap. 69, to dispose of surplus publications, giving preference to exchange for what we needed and favoring out own citizens who might wish to avail themselves of this opportunity to fill up their collections. Much has been done in this way, and I have obtained a large number of very valuable books, many of them grown exceedingly rare; but much remains to be done, requiring an amount of correspondence which duties more immediately pressing has delayed.

I regret to have to report that none of the missing legislative and executive documents have yet been found, and very few of the Journals, in which alone can be found the names of our earlier legislators and history of their work.

My exchange-book, sales-books, printed list, letter-books, etc., furnish a history of all the above named transactions.

Another work devolved upon me by Executive order was the carrying out, on the part of Kentucky, her obligations to the other States in the matter of exchange. Every

State, and nearly every Territory, has a law providing for the exchange with every other, of Supreme Court Reports, Laws of Assembly, Journals, Legislative Documents, etc., etc. Under the order referred to, [a] circular letter was addressed to each State and Territory to ascertain the extent of our obligations, and to notify all of our lack of such of their works as were deemed of most importance to Kentucky. Many of the States responded, and prompt and full exchange with nearly all is assured for the future.

The exchange of what was lacking for past years has been going on, and many hundred[s] of books have been sent out, while few States or Territories have failed to make up, as far as possible, all that I have called for. A little additional effort on the part of the Librarian will doubtless result in restoring the best of relations in this respect with the other members of the Union, and redound to both the credit and the advantage of this State. My exchange-book and letter-files contain the history of this feature of the Library work.

Another duty devolved upon the Librarian by a decision of the Attorney-General's, (Jan. 5th, 1889.)

The law had previously been construed to mean that the exchange of Supreme Court Reports as well as the distribution of these and other publications among the counties was the duty of the Secretary of State; and further, that he was charged with the sale of the Reports to book-dealers and to the profession.

The decision alluded to placed upon the Librarian the responsibility of sale and exchange; and the shipping, mailing, and recording of these involve no inconsiderable amount of labor and care. During the last ten months I have turned into the Treasury from this source about two thousand two hundred dollars, while every State and Territory

entitled to them have promptly been supplied with the volumes issued this year and with those of the older volumes found to be due them.

A good deal of binding has been found necessary, but little has been done in this way except for the purpose of putting in convenient shape to be consulted certain newspapers, for which we had frequent call. The binding and putting in place of ten volumes of these have brought this work up to May, 1889.

The catalogue, the written list, and the list of surplus publications, all of which I transmit herewith, will indicate the present character of the Library. Of its scattered condition, and the shifts to which I have been put to make the whole body of it available in case of need, you are fully advised. And this further fact need but be averted to, that as to arrangement it is in but the crudest state, and can be but little better without provision for placing the whole collection in contiguous rooms, making a closer classification, and adopting a method of numbering and placing that will insure the finding of the most inconsiderable volume in a few minutes.

It is a gratifying fact, however, which I may note, that with the purchases recently ordered by the Court of Appeals, the books that I have obtained during the year, and those which I am authorized to buy, with your advice and consent (Sec. 4, Art. 2, Chap. 69, General Statutes), the Law Library will be so full, and comprise standard works of such recent date and so great diversity, as to be almost fully adequate to the demands of the Court, the profession, the General Assembly, and the public at large.

An examination of the accompanying list will show that in works of general reference the Library is by no means poor, and that in the department of history and biography the collection is far from being despicable. It is marred by the serious defect of



broken sets, but the missing volumes can be supplied at no very considerable cost. Almost every important interest or industry of the State can find here treatises, statistics, etc., pertinent to it. The most valuable additions made to it this year (except in the Law Department and the Collins Library) are a full set of Coates's Herd Book, thirty-two volumes; the English Stud Book, nine volumes; and the Annual Register, one hundred and thirty-volumes--the latter an English work containing a succinct history, in the order of occurrence, of all notable events in the civilized world from 1758 to 1886--one hundred and twenty-six years.

There is one serious obstacle connected with the use of the Law Library, to which I may call your attention, and it affects both the Supreme Court and the gentlemen who practice before it. The only consultation room of which the judges can now avail themselves is the west room of the Library. Few days pass in which they do not have to work together here. It is impossible to find place in the east room (where the lawyers consult authorities and do much of their writing) for all the books in current use, many of them being in the other. The consequence is, that the judges can scarcely be said to have privacy at all, and certainly not that which is favorable to the best and most expeditious work, since they are often interrupted by persons who wish to enter, while those who come to use the Library are frequently deprived, in a measure, of that privilege by the necessity which the judges are under to forbid interruption.

Your directions as to the Library work empowered me to employ help, and I availed myself of this, but to such an extent only as was absolutely necessary to supplement the labor the Assistant Librarian and myself.”