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1-1-2005

# A History of the Libraries: The University of Iowa Libraries, 1855-2000

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*International Dictionary of Library Histories* [Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001].

## Comments

For full article, see David H. Stam, ed. *International Dictionary of Library Histories* [Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001].

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# A History of the Libraries

The University of Iowa Libraries

1855 - 2000

Iowa City, Iowa

In February 1847, just 59 days after Iowa was proclaimed a state, the First General Assembly passed legislation establishing The University of Iowa. Eight years later, in 1855, the University officially inaugurated its first academic year. In November of that year, two boxes containing approximately 50 books were sent from New York by Amos Dean, the newly appointed but *in absentia* president of the University. These volumes, purchased for \$106, were destined to be the first installment for a university library. Their general appearance failed to stimulate sufficient interest to fully unpack and shelve them. The boxes were labeled the “Dean Library” and stored in a four-foot square room.

Throughout the next twenty years, library holdings grew sporadically and management of the library was casual and haphazard. However, by 1870 the collection held 2,560 volumes including a backlog of approximately 500 uncataloged congressional and other public documents. The appointment of Amos Currier, professor of Latin, as librarian in 1868 significantly enhanced the future development of the library. Praised by administrators, faculty and students, Currier implemented collection development policies that supported the purchase of contemporary works rather than “nothing but text learning” and which augmented class room instruction. During his tenure the library was moved to more spacious quarters, the collection

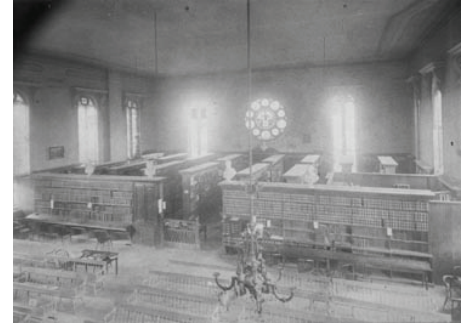


Amos Currier, 1879

grew to 12,000 volumes, and service hours increased from one to six hours per day. His continuing requests for the appointment of a full-time librarian went unanswered until 1879, when Ada North, a professional librarian, was given complete and sole charge of the library.

The enthusiastic North set about to change the image of the librarian from one who collected and preserved books to one who fostered their use, both extensively and intelligently. During her eleven-year term of office North introduced the first card catalog (1881), instituted use of the Dewey Decimal classification system, and completely reclassified the entire collection (1886-1887).

In 1882, the growing library was moved to the second floor of North Hall despite repeated warning that the building was unsafe. In the early morning hours of June 19, 1897, lightning struck North Hall, and the ensuing flames traveled throughout the building. Barely an hour after the fire started, the



North Hall, 1882-1902

second assistant librarian, Mary Barrett, and three volunteer firemen entered the inferno to save as much as possible. The loss to the library and its contents, estimated at \$100,000, was devastating – 25,000 volumes, 15,000 pamphlets and the 40,000 cards in the catalog were lost.

By the turn of the century, and soon after the library moved back to North Hall, the campaign for a separate library building resumed. When repeated requests remained unanswered, it became necessary to move the library to larger quarters, first to the new Hall of Liberal Arts (Schaeffer Hall) and later to the Hall of Natural Science (MacBride Hall). Because space to house the growing collection remained a significant issue, departmental libraries proliferated, at one time totaling 21 separate collections. Over the next forty years, as the libraries continued to grow the need for a new building was critical. In 1941 Ralph Ellsworth accepted appointment as director of the library with the assurance that a new building would be actualized.

Known for his imaginative ideas and talents, especially in library construction, Ellsworth envisioned a structure that would integrate library facilities with educational programs. Modeled after the scientific laboratories where student and faculty worked side-by-side, the library would bring together student, faculty and resources into a partnership.

From the beginning obstacles impeded Ellsworth’s designs. When the building finally opened in 1951, lack of space hampered Ellsworth’s blueprint to integrate academic departments into the new building, and his concept of professor-librarian partnerships working in the library-laboratory was not supported by the liberal arts faculty.

As a “library statesman,” not a technician, Ellsworth needed someone to manage day-to-day activities. In June 1953, he recruited Dale M. Bentz as Associate Director. On Ellsworth’s resignation, Bentz was a finalist for the directorship. However, Leslie W. Dunlap was appointed to the position in 1958.

As with other research libraries across the nation, the UI Libraries experienced an upsurge of growth during the 1960s and 1970s. During this period the book collections grew from 950,000 volumes to over 2,350,000 volumes. Unfortunately, by the end of the 1970s, funding became less plentiful. Inflation rendered



Main Library, 1951

materials budgets inadequate, the pace of acquisitions slowed and successive serial cancellation projects began. The already understaffed library lost 17 full-time

positions.

In December 1981, Dunlap retired after 23 years with the University. His position, Dean of Library Administration, was eliminated, and Dale Bentz became the administrator retaining the title of University Librarian. Bentz retired in August 1986, having given 33 years of service to the University. After a national search, Sheila D. Creth was appointed University Librarian in January 1987.

Inadequate allocations for both material and human resources continued to plague the Libraries, but with innovation and foresight Creth was able to move the Libraries into the electronic age without abandoning traditional services and goals and to increase its visibility both on the campus and nationally.

One such project was the development of the Information Arcade in January 1992. Established with a grant of \$752,432 from the Roy J. Carver Charitable Trust of Muscatine, this award-winning resource includes a fully networked classroom with state-of-the-art projection and sound equipment and additional workstations supporting a wide range of information applications of multi-media materials. The success of the Arcade was the catalyst for another grant from the

Carver Trust to construct a similar facility, the Information Commons, in the Hardin Library.

In December 1999 Sheila Creth resigned. After a national search, Nancy L. Baker arrived from Washington State University in August 2000. Later that year, partially from funds allocated by the Parent’s Association, the Libraries replaced chairs throughout Main Library study areas. Much of the upholstered stock replaced was by then more than 30 years old. In a break with long-standing tradition, another amenity was added when a coffee shop serving cold food, the Food for Thought Café, opened in 2001. It quickly became extremely popular.

The Libraries celebrated acquisition of its four millionth volume in 2002. However, in Iowa as in many states, declining revenues in and after 2001 forced sharp and repeated budget cuts through 2004-2005. Fortunately, the University held firm to a policy of not cutting acquisitions funds.

The start of a new century found the University of Iowa Libraries on the brink of a new era as the University’s five-year, \$1 billion dollar, comprehensive campaign, “Good. Better. Best. Iowa!” came alive and included a \$12 million goal for the Libraries. This funding will allow the Libraries to continue its tradition of excellence for the next 150 years.

- Richard Kolbet, Librarian Emeritus and  
Sid Huttner, Head of Special Collections  
2005