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## Syracuse University Library, 1871-1972

Daniel Brassell

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Ernest S. Bird Library  
Dedication Issue

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# *Syracuse University Library, 1871—1972*

by Daniel Brassell

Syracuse University Library has had to cope with financial problems ever since its modest beginnings in 1871. With careful budgeting and generous donations from numerous benefactors, however, it has achieved a respected position as one of the more interesting and varied collections in the United States.

The library, located originally on the second floor of what was then known as the Myers Block at East Genessee and Montgomery Streets, was a humble affair when it first opened its doors in 1871. Mr. John P. Griffin was appointed the first librarian in May of that year. Apparently his duties were neither rigorous nor time-consuming as Mr. Griffin was also registrar and clerk of the University. The library certainly was of no great size and it must have been a simple operation to move it into its new quarters in Room 207 of the Hall of Languages in 1873, where the reading area seated twenty-five people. A wire cage surrounded the book collection, and books were allowed to be used only in the reading room, surely a great inconvenience because the library was open only during the week from nine until one o'clock. Use of the catalog, always kept locked in the office of the registrar, was deemed a great privilege.

By 1877, the collection had grown to approximately 10,000-11,000 volumes. In the following year Syracuse University Library became the government depository for the area, due to the efforts of Mr. Frank Hiscock, Syracuse attorney and later Chief Judge of the New York Court of Appeals, and by the mid-1880s, had developed a respectable collection for a small upstate New York university with an enrollment of some 500 students.

One event which brought world-wide attention to the library and, in the words of one historian, heightened "the prestige and standing of the

*Mr. Brassell, who holds a Master's degree in History from San Diego State College, is a graduate student in the School of Library Science at Syracuse and is employed in the library. Among the sources for his article were Syracuse University Archives and Syracuse University by W. Freeman Galpin, Syracuse University Press, 1952.*

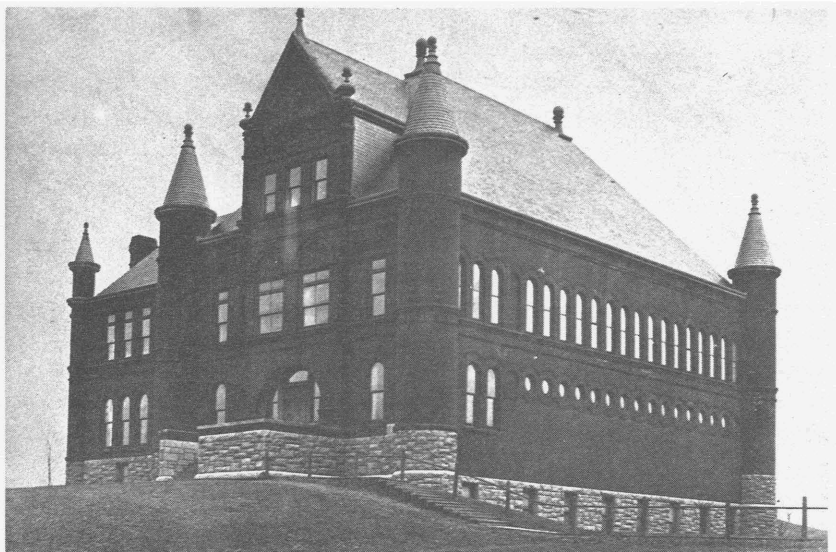
*All illustrations accompanying the article are from Syracuse University Archives.*

University throughout the American academic world,” was the accession of the private library of the German scholar Leopold von Ranke, considered by many one of the great historians of the century. The acquisition of the Von Ranke Library, described elsewhere in this issue of *The Courier*, resulted from the efforts of Dr. Charles W. Bennett, a former professor and librarian at Syracuse who discovered the availability of the library, and Dr. John M. Reid, a friend of the University whom Dr. Bennett persuaded to provide the funds for the purchase. Reid attached only one stipulation to his magnificent gift, that a fire-proof building be constructed to house the new library. This demand was the motivation for the erection of the first building to be constructed on the campus that was designed solely to house a library. After a prolonged campaign to raise the \$40,000 needed, the Von Ranke Library, now the Administration Building, was opened for use in 1889. The von Ranke collection, which had been stored in the basement of the Hall of Languages awaiting the completion of its new home, was moved into the new library building during March and April of 1889. One minor accident was recorded during the move: an iron stairway collapsed under the weight of “a corpulent faculty member.”

The von Ranke collection almost doubled the number of volumes in the library and apparently served as a stimulus to other donors. In his report of 1891, the librarian, Henry O. Sibley, noted the size of the library’s collection as nearly 42,000 volumes, including about 6,000 books and pamphlets that had been donated since the opening of the new building. In comparison, forty books and nine pamphlets were purchased during the same period. The paucity of library funds evidenced by the small book budget was a reflection of the continuing financial difficulties of the University. The almost total reliance on gifts resulted in a collection strong in history, theology, philosophy and literature but weak in the sciences and arts. It also meant that most books being acquired by the library were not of recent publication and in many cases of limited value to the student. Nevertheless, Syracuse University Library had become the third largest college library in the state of New York by 1892, when students numbered approximately 700.

**THESE BOOKS ARE NOT  
TO BE REMOVED FROM  
THIS ROOM UNDER ANY  
CIRCUMSTANCES WHAT-  
EVER.**

Implacable rule of 1885.



The Von Ranke Library in 1889 (now the Administration Building),  
the first library building on the campus.

Within a few short years after the opening of the Von Ranke Library, repairs and extra space were sorely needed. In 1894 the librarian reported leaks in the roof and the need for better ventilation, a carpet, a cabinet, additional radiators, and an addition at the west end of the building to house a reference library and reading room. Mr. Sibley ended his report, as he would virtually every annual report he wrote, by stating that “the crying need is books.” In an effort to cope with crowded and inadequate conditions, two major policy changes were effected. First, the library rules were liberalized to allow students to take books from the library and library hours were lengthened. Second, in 1895 the Dewey Decimal System was adopted in place of the fixed location for each book, the practice previously followed. After several temporary expedients had been tried, a west wing was added to the Von Ranke Library in 1903 but it was found inadequate for the library’s needs the very next year.

The inadequacy of library space was soon remedied when in 1905 the University solicited a \$150,000 contribution from Andrew Carnegie for a new library building. Carnegie’s stipulation that matching funds be raised as an endowment for the library was soon met through large donations provided by John D. Archbold, vice president of the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey and president of the University’s Board of Trustees, and Samuel W. Bowne, also a member of the Board of Trustees. The Carnegie Library opened for use in late 1907 and received high praise from several sources. The librarian at the University of Pennsylvania thought “that it was the best planned college library in the country, and that more things could be done in it at less

expense of time and space than in any other library of his acquaintance.” Chancellor James R. Day thought the new library filled all the needs and expectations of the university community.

With a magnificent new building and a large endowment, it may have seemed to many that the library’s problems were at last solved. This unfortunately was not to be the case. A \$100,000 endowment fund established by Dr. Reid for the library was channeled eventually into other projects. The Carnegie Endowment Fund was invested in building a dormitory for men, now Sims Hall, the profits from which were to go to the library, but these funds were far from sufficient to meet library expenses. The situation worsened during a period of financial crisis for the University beginning in 1909. By the end of the academic year 1909-1910, Syracuse University had 3,200 students with a library of about 80,000 volumes. The appropriations for the library for 1909-1910 included \$9,600 for salaries, \$670 for binding and expenses, and a \$3,600 book budget. The librarian estimated that other institutions in New York were accessioning ten books for every one accessioned at Syracuse. Syracuse at this time ranked thirteenth in the nation in the number of students but only twenty-second in the size of its library.

Around the turn of the century many departments in the University began establishing their own specialized collections. These libraries developed through donations and annual “book days” which were parties given each year to raise funds for the departmental libraries. The small libraries had certain advantages that were not to be found in the Carnegie Library. They held small, specialized collections, had open stacks, and were convenient to use. There were, however, several drawbacks. The departmental libraries had irregular hours and lacked library personnel. The books were not cataloged and classified until students of the Library School, working as volunteers, arranged some of the largest collections. By 1905 ten departments had their own libraries with more than 17,000 volumes combined, ranging from History with more than 2,800 to Chemistry with 65 volumes.

Departmental libraries were not viewed favorably by the professional library staff. The librarians pressed for the reduction of the number of libraries to one per building with a trained librarian at each branch, the maintenance of regular hours, and the holding at the branch library of only working collections rather than of the complete collection of a specialized subject. By 1927 there were sixteen departmental libraries with Slocum Hall alone housing those of the Agriculture, Architecture, Business Administration and Home Economics departments. Librarians in their yearly reports pointed to the expense and duplication of departmental libraries, the inaccessibility and unfamiliarity of these libraries to most of the students, and the inadequate open hours. These arguments began to have effect by the end of the decade as a policy of consolidating the departmental libraries into one branch library in each building was initiated. By 1931 there were nine branches and the four departmental libraries in Slocum Hall.

ANDREW CARNEGIE  
2 EAST 91ST STREET  
NEW YORK

April 18th, 1905.

Chancellor James R. Day,  
Syracuse University,  
Syracuse, N. Y.

Dear Sir,

Congratulations on your advice of 17th that you have raised the necessary \$150,000 fund. Mr. Carnegie's cashier, Mr. R. A. Franks, Home Trust Co., Hoboken, N.J., has been instructed to honor the calls of the authorities of Syracuse University for sums needed to complete their Library Building, as work progresses, to the extent of One Hundred and Fifty Thousand Dollars. Please communicate with Mr. Franks.

Respectfully yours,

  
P. Secretary.

Confirmation of Andrew Carnegie's 1905 gift  
of \$150,000 for a new library building.



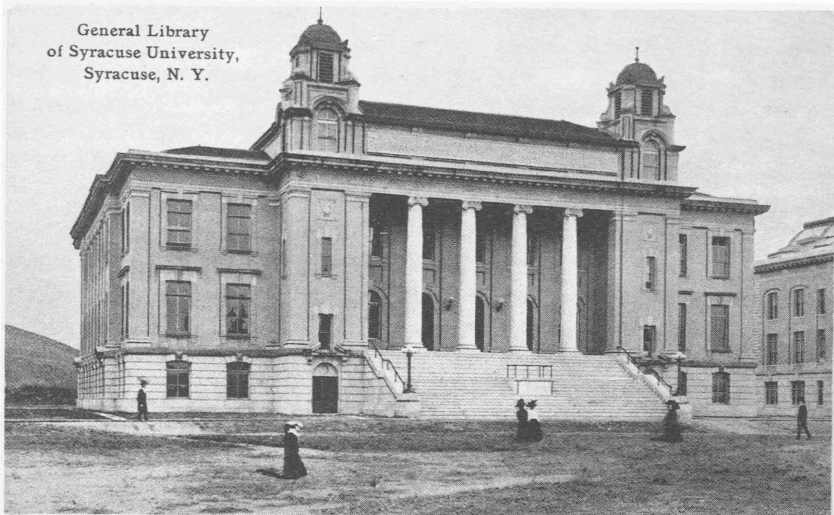
The growth of departmental libraries was only one of several problems faced by the librarians in the 1920s. The basic problem, as always, was financial. The years of World War I and those immediately after it were particularly bad ones for the library, with some slight improvement toward the end of the decade. New methods of teaching, stressing the use of collateral readings rather than dependence on a single textbook, caused an unprecedented growth in the demands on the library. Another problem was that of space; by 1927 lack of space forced many students using the library to sit on radiators or on the stairs. Despite this deplorable crowding of library facilities, non-library departments continued to occupy space in Carnegie. The ground floor was used for classrooms, a storage area, a paint shop and a bindery that was not used. On the main floor a third of the available space was allotted to the YWCA and the Library School. On the third floor a large amount of space was devoted to seminar rooms and faculty offices. In one fashion or another, the problem of space for the library collection and those wishing to use it has continued until the present day.

Maintenance of an adequate staff with adequate pay was an acute problem in the 1920s. As a result of the library's financial difficulties during and following World War I, the number of library personnel was below the pre-World War I level. In the librarian's annual report for 1925 it was claimed that the amount budgeted for library salaries at Syracuse was on a scale comparable to universities with one-tenth the registration of Syracuse University, and that members of the library staff could easily find employment at other libraries with the expectation of salaries 25 to 50 percent higher than at Syracuse.

The poor condition which the library faced in the 1920s worsened in the 1930s. The library staff received a ten percent cut in salaries and many of its members took one-to-six-month leaves of absence without pay in 1933-34. Once again the librarian, this time Wharton Miller who had assumed the post in 1927, requested that Syracuse University staff salaries be raised "at least to the minimum level existing throughout the country" and that the staff be "increased to a number sufficient to operate efficiently in the space available." A survey committee examined the library in 1934-35 and found it to be "wholly inadequate in space for books and for readers." In an attempt to compensate for the lack of space in Carnegie, the number of branch libraries was expanded. This the survey committee believed was a waste of both space and salaries. With regard to the Carnegie building, the survey committee found that there was inadequate lighting, poor ventilation, walls needing paint, floors in poor and in some cases dangerous condition, and worn-out equipment in need of replacement.

In spite of these difficulties, the library continued to grow in collections and personnel and to improve service. Many non-library functions were moved out of Carnegie to other quarters in order to gain some of the desperately needed space for the library. The storage rooms on the ground

General Library  
of Syracuse University,  
Syracuse, N. Y.



Carnegie  
Library...  
Early Days

Floor I. Stack F Section e  
Shelf 2 No. 2

Bartsch, Karl.  
Chrestomathie de l'Ancien Francois (VIII<sup>e</sup>-XV<sup>e</sup> Scds)  
Accompagnée d'une Grammaire et d'un Glossaire

Leipzig: F.C.W. Vogel, 1875  
1 vol., 8°, 1/4 moracco.

M-5-2.





**America's Asia; dissenting essays on Asian-American relations.** Edited by Edward Friedman & Mark Selden. (1st ed.) New York, Pantheon Books (1971,

xx, 458 p. 22 cm. (Pantheon antitextbooks) \$10.00

Includes bibliographical references.

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*Carnegie  
Library. . .  
the 1950s*



floor were converted to offices, classrooms and a Library School study, and the YWCA was moved to the Chapel. The Library School rooms on the main floor were converted to Art and Reference rooms and in 1935 a listening room was installed. The von Ranke collection was now considered out of date and was moved to a room prepared especially for it on the fourth floor.

The demand for more library space became even more pressing in the next decade. Annually, the librarian reported the need for a new building, describing Carnegie as “an ill-suited, over-crowded, poorly equipped, wretchedly lighted, noisy, inefficient building” which “can only be more forcefully related as the number of students increases and as new demands are made on it by recently appointed faculty members who are accustomed to better conditions, better treatment.” Three plans for the library were discussed: remodeling Carnegie and building an addition to it, building a new library near Slocum Hall, and building a new library on the site of the Hall of Languages. Fortunately, the plan to demolish the Hall of Languages was never executed, although the librarian, while acknowledging that this would be the most costly of the three plans, thought the idea had “the value of keynoting Syracuse as a learned institution by featuring the library as the most important structure.”

Despite the plans for building a new library or extending Carnegie, no move was made by the University to expand library space. Rather, the University was looking toward expanding the library book collection to facilitate the establishment of doctoral programs. An important component in the move to expand the available library research materials was the Army Air Force, which gave the library \$7.50 per year for each World War II Air Cadet training at the University. This enabled the library to increase its book budget from \$27,060 in 1942-43 to \$45,360 in the following year.

While funds for books finally were being increased, staff salaries were still low, forcing the library to accept what it could get in the way of staff. In 1943 Wharton Miller gloomily forecast a staff “forever feminized” because salaries were not high enough to attract any men to join the staff. He also noted that in a ten-month period almost a third of the staff had left for greener pastures and that “the quality of the staff and, therefore, the quality of the work performed has seriously deteriorated.” Nearly a decade later he reported that despite recent salary increases, the staff salaries were \$600 below the national average.

The size of the book collection continued to grow at a rapid rate in the last half of the 1940s and into the 1950s. One hundred thousand volumes were added between 1947 and 1954, giving the library 487,000 volumes, or three and one half times the 136,000 it contained in 1927. In spite of this tremendous growth, the library was in the same building it had occupied since 1907, which caused Mr. Miller to lament that Carnegie “unfortunately, is strong, sturdy and in good repair” which made it “difficult to realize that it is not suitable for library purposes, that it is inefficient as any library building

can be, that it cannot be made more efficient, that it can take no more books.”

Two major decisions were made in the 1950s concerning the book collection. One was to invest heavily in microfilm reproductions in order to save space and to obtain materials not available in book form. The microfilm collection grew steadily and became one of the largest in the United States. The other major decision was to create a Rare Book department to collect and preserve rare materials. Through the generosity of George Arents, a noted book collector, director of several corporations, and a Syracuse alumnus, two rooms on the third floor of Carnegie Library were converted into the Rare Book department in 1956. Many valuable books and collections were added gradually, including the von Ranke collection, the Arents Stephen Crane collection, the Spencer collection of books and serials on Japan, the Leyh collection, and the Edward FitzGerald collection, to name just a few.

At the end of the 1950s a decision was made to use the former Continental Can Company building on Erie Boulevard as storage for the overflow of books from Carnegie and the branch libraries. Known as the “Library Annex,” this building also was used to house the major portion of the vast manuscript collection which was ranked as the tenth largest in the United States in 1967. Obviously, the use of this building as a warehouse for a large part of Syracuse University Library could be only a temporary expedient.

Several major events made the 1960s a time of change for the library and held the promise of a brighter future. In 1965 John S. and Edith Mayfield presented to Syracuse University their personal library of more than 38,000 volumes and 15,000 manuscripts featuring English and American literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This was by far the largest collection ever given to the library. During this period planning was begun to automate as many library procedures as possible in order to save funds and improve services. Another important innovation was the creation of the Five Associated University Libraries (FAUL) of Syracuse, Cornell University, the University of Rochester, the State University at Binghamton and the State University at Buffalo. This association was formed to promote greater coordination and cooperation of the major university libraries in upstate New York. Among the many other changes were the creation of a Government Documents department in 1965-66, the establishment of blanket standing order agreements with all the major publishers, and in 1965-66 the opening of the stacks for direct use by the students and faculty for the first time in the library's history.

The most important event in the 1960s was the decision to build the long-awaited, long-overdue new library building. By 1968 it was estimated that Carnegie Library contained twice the number of books and six times as many staff members as the architects had planned for it originally in 1903-04. To replace the sixty-five-year-old Carnegie Library as the main library structure on campus, the seven-floor Ernest S. Bird Library has been

constructed with a capacity of 1,500,000 volumes and seating for 2,700 people. The key word to describe this structure is flexibility; every attempt has been made to design it for optimum use at present and to provide adequate flexibility to insure optimum use in future years.

This year, 1972, Syracuse University Library is in its one hundred and first year of operation. Difficulties have abounded in practically every period of the library's development. Through it all, the library system has managed to survive, to bear with the situation, to cope with the difficulty, to improvise, and, of greatest importance, to grow. The new Ernest S. Bird Library stands as witness to this worthy past and symbol of hope for the future.

