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Charles W. Bennett's "The Purchase of the von Ranke Library." A Prefatory Note

John J. Morrison

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Recommended Citation

Morrison, John J. "Charles W. Bennett's 'The Purchase of the von Ranke Library.' A Prefatory Note. The Courier 15.2 and 15.3 (1978): 15-18.

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**EX LIBRIS DR. LEOPOLDI DE RANKE.
DR. JOANNES M. REID ET CAROLINA S. REID
DONAVERUNT.**

*Von Ranke Library Bookplate
Syracuse University*

THE COURIER

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Charles W. Bennett's
"The Purchase of the von Ranke Library"
A Prefatory Note

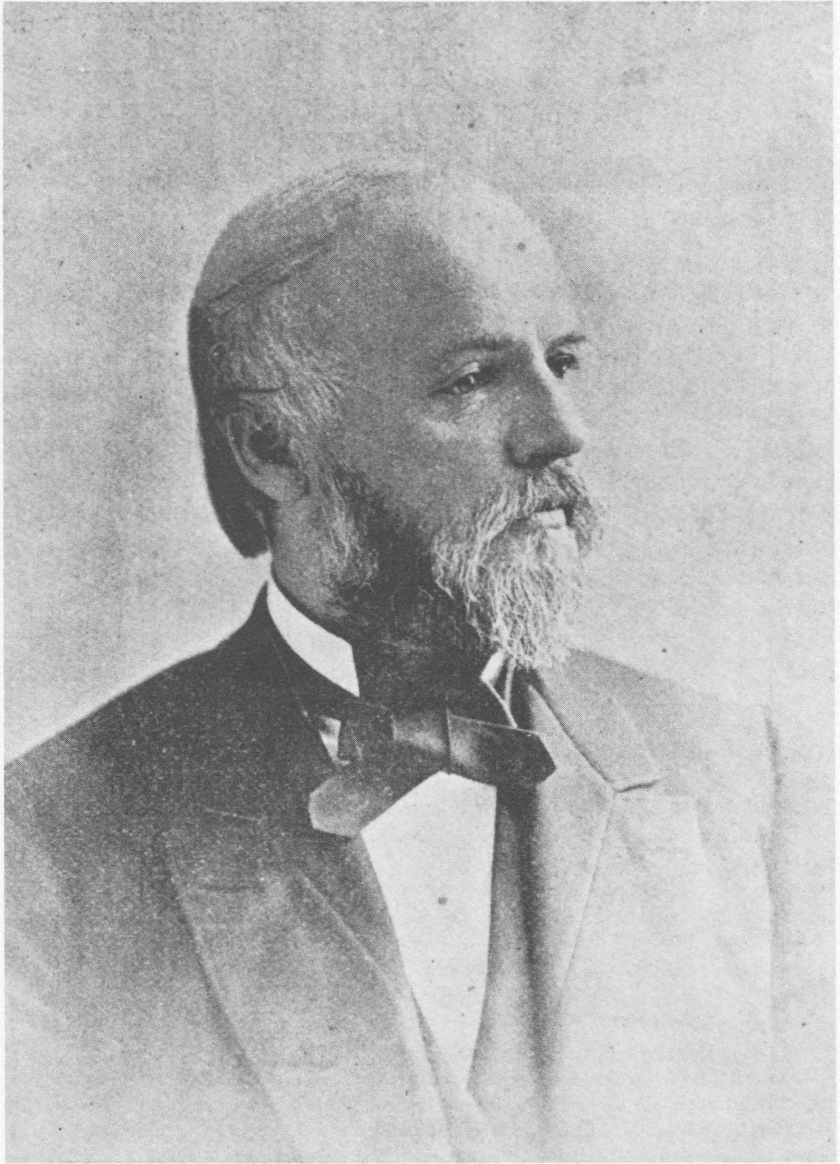
by John J. Morrison

Now that the cataloging of the library of the nineteenth-century German historian, Leopold von Ranke, is well under way, public attention has again turned to the question of how the Ranke Collection first came to Syracuse University. Although three brief but scholarly articles have touched upon this event,¹ a long standing and largely inaccurate oral tradition still continues to provide most of the public knowledge about how the collection was acquired.² Recently, however, a document was discovered in the university Archives that may lay these popular legends to rest. It contains Charles W. Bennett's first-hand account of how the Ranke Library was purchased for Syracuse University in 1887.

John J. Morrison is a consultant to the Ranke Collection Catalog Project. He holds the Ph.D. in history from Syracuse University.

¹The best account of how the collection came to Syracuse is Bernhard Hoeft's article, "Das Schicksal der Ranke-Bibliothek," published in *Historische Studien* 307 (1937): 5-45. Hoeft consulted German sources in addition to the materials in the Syracuse University Archives. The article is inaccessible to most Americans, however; it was not only written forty years ago but it is in German. Fifteen years later when William Freeman Galpin wrote his history of Syracuse University, he allotted six pages to the event but relied heavily upon Hoeft's article. See Galpin, *Syracuse University*, 5 vols. (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1952), 1:88-93. In 1972, Jeremy C. Jackson published an excellent history of the Ranke Collection at Syracuse but allowed only one page to its acquisition. See Jackson, "Leopold von Ranke and the Von Ranke Library," *The Courier* IX, 4 (1972): 45.

²The oral tradition surrounding the acquisition of the Ranke Collection began to develop as early as 1897. The June 8 issue of the *University Forum* for that year ran an article claiming that Syracuse University purchased the Ranke library at a public auction in Germany. It further revealed that Syracuse outbid the German government, the British Museum and Cornell University with an offer of \$45,000. A more recent addition to the tradition tells the story of a wealthy Syracuse patrician and his wife on European tour during the late 1880's. While passing through Germany, this couple discovered that the Ranke library was up for sale and decided to buy it for the fledgling university that had recently been established in their hometown.



CHARLES WESLEY BENNETT

Although Bennett became professor of Church History and Archeology at the Garrett Biblical Institute in 1884, he never put aside his loyalty to Syracuse University. He had served as a member of the original faculty from the time of the institution's founding in 1871 until his departure in 1884. While at Syracuse, he was professor of History and Logic, chairman of the History Department and, from 1874-1884, university librarian. It was during this first year as librarian that he conceived the plan to purchase the 20,000+ volume library of Leopold von Ranke. He had a personal knowledge of both the library and its creator, having studied under Ranke at the University of Berlin between 1864 and 1866. It was not until twelve years later, however, that he was able to carry out his plan; and by then, he was a faculty member at the Garrett Biblical Institute in Evanston, Illinois.

Besides personally traveling to Berlin to negotiate the purchase in the summer of 1886, and seeing it through to a successful conclusion in April 1887, Bennett continued to oversee the actual transfer of the library from Berlin to Syracuse in the spring of 1888. Then, in the early months of 1889, he agreed to return to the central New York area in order to dedicate the nearly completed Von Ranke Library building, which had been specifically designed to house the books of his former mentor. Unfortunately, Bennett was struck with what his wife described as "Bright's disease," an "awful inflammatory rheumatism" that would eventually take his life in 1891.³ Therefore, he was unable to preside at the June 24, 1889 dedication.⁴ Instead he forwarded the manuscript copy of his speech to the Dedication Committee which appointed the new chairman of the History Department, Dr. C.J. Little, to read the document at the ceremony. It is the typed manuscript of this speech, as it was delivered by Little, that has been recently located in the university Archives. The speech, presented here in its entirety for the first time, gives a detailed first-hand account of the purchase of Syracuse University's Ranke Collection.⁵

³*The University News*, April 21, 1891.

⁴*The Syracusean*, July 3, 1889, p. 209.

⁵Apparently Bennett also sent a copy of the speech to the *Library Journal*; an abbreviated version of it appeared on pages 43-45 of the February 1890 issue. This text differs from the version that Dr. Little read at the dedication ceremony, however. Little changed the first three paragraphs of the speech from a first person narrative to a third, and made some other minor adjustments throughout the text.



This picture of Leopold von Ranke, sitting in his study amongst his books, was taken during the last two years of his life. This one room, however, could not hold his complete library; his books spilled over into four other “large” rooms. Ranke refused to systematically organize or catalog his books in the fear that he would be unable to find them. Thus, his books were piled haphazardly two deep on his book shelves and on the floor awaiting the day when they would be finally cataloged at Syracuse University.