

A History of  
**THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEDICINE**  
The Nation's Treasury of Medical Knowledge

by  
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The photograph of the interior of Ford's Theatre, 1893, is from the National Archives. The photograph of the chemistry laboratory is from the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology. All other photographs are from the National Library of Medicine.

# Preface

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The word library is no longer adequate for the National Library of Medicine, as Wyndham Miles makes abundantly clear in this splendid and searching history. The NLM and its offspring have become the central nervous system of American medical thought and research. My unlikely association with the Library goes back more than 50 years because of the Library's juxtaposition to the old Army Medical Museum. As a lad I visited the Museum out of nothing better than morbid curiosity and then wandered around the Surgeon General's Library. Decades later it was my good fortune to be a member of the Board of Regents twice over a 12-year span that saw a changing in the guard and the movement from the Old Red Building on the Mall to the present site in Bethesda.

Few people besides parents can form any reasonable opinion of a newborn babe's future greatness. The birth of an almost invisible library occurred when the brand new Army Surgeon General Lovell needed a few medical books of his own in 1818. The story of the growth and transformation of the Library as it grew up to be a supremely valuable central nervous network of medical memory is detailed in a fashion which embodies Wyndham Miles' dedication, thoroughness, great concentration, and endurance. He has made what might have been a mere chronicle into a story of imagination, of organizations, of ideas, and of many remarkably dedicated persons, military and civilian. Under a variety of governmental auspices they have managed to perform miracles.

For there to be an Army medical library there had to be an Army Medical Department, which was established in 1818 when Joseph Lovell became Surgeon General. A list of the Library's very small holdings was written in a thin notebook in 1840. By the latter part of the Civil War a printed catalog noted 485 titles including about 50 journals. The total number of volumes was a little over 2,000.

The shape which the Library took and its remarkable importance as repository and source of a great index are the work of that remarkable genius John Shaw Billings who *was* the library from 1865 to 1895. In the days of candles and kerosene lamps, before air conditioning, the Library, under Billings' impetus, produced its first general catalog in volume after volume. This catalog would have amounted to very little if Billings had not been a master buyer and exchanger and had not learned the ways of book dealers in American cities and, in particular, those of British and European agents. The massive catalogs and indexes represent in a unique way the work of one person aided, to be sure, by soldier clerks, scribes, and some professional catalogers.

Today we reckon bureaus as inefficient. They are characterized by the denigrating term bureaucracy. But here was a government organization run on a shoestring. A surprising book collection in the Army where, in one place, were assembled the major medical books, journals, and indeed the historic medical masterpieces of Western Civilization.

Following Billings' retirement the Surgeon General's Library went into a slower phase. The indexes flourished, the search for and purchase of important medical books continued, the serials proliferated. During World War I there was a certain amount of difficulty from reduced staff, but progress continued. Some of the librarians—Phalen, Ashburn, and Hume—achieved real scholarship.

The beginning of important changes occurred with the arrival of Harold W. Jones in the late depression year 1936. In 1943 Jones got the Rockefeller Foundation to appoint a committee to review the function, policies, and future course of the Library. This was the beginning of the approach to the modern period. Two groups—the Friends of the Army Medical Library and the Association of Honorary Consultants—flourished at different times during this period and many who later served on the Board of Regents, a group of experienced teachers, clinicians, administrators, and scholars, had a strong supporting role. This was very helpful during the later period of changing homes for the Library and of developing and broadening the program of accession, indexing, storage and retrieval as the computer and electronic age arrived.

Joseph McNinch, the director from 1946 to 1949, with his considerable Army experience was able to introduce many administrative advances and efficiencies. There was a notable improvement in the morale of the staff as the pressures of World War II began to fade into the background.

The true coming of age in the modern sense was associated with the arrival in 1949 of Brad Rogers as the Director. He was given the opportunity to study modern librarianship, its arts and techniques, and thus was the first Director whose training gave him insights into the ways and means of solving problems, both those common to all libraries and those unique to a large medical library, particularly one run under Army auspices. Two great achievements of Rogers' 14 years were the building and transfer of books to the splendid modern National Library of Medicine in Bethesda and the development of MEDLARS.

An especially important year was 1956, when Senators John Kennedy and Lister Hill supported a bill to create the National Library of Medicine.

The dedication of the new building was held in the main reading room on December 14, 1961. A cutting from the Hippocratic plane tree was planted and there were two days of congratulations and speeches, as well as solemn wonder and admiration. Before the books had been moved from the old Library to the new, when there was only one other book in the Library, I presented a copy of Osler's *Aphorisms* to the Library and was able to say that for about two weeks I had donated half the books in the NLM. Actual movement took

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place in two very busy months—March and April—done with amazing skill; and it was open to the public on the 16th of April, 1962.

The current era opened with the arrival in 1964 of Martin Cummings as Director. In 1964 and 1965 MEDLARS got into production in many different fields. The Billings Centennial was held in June 1965 and in October President Johnson signed the Medical Library Assistance Act which authorized a grant program to rejuvenate medical libraries throughout the Nation. A Drug Literature Program began this year, followed in 1966 by the Toxicology Information Program. In 1967 the National Medical Audiovisual Center was transferred from the Public Health Service's Communicable Disease Center in Atlanta to the Library, and the Francis A. Countway Library at Harvard became the first Regional Medical Library in a network that ultimately contained eleven. Library research and development was inaugurated by Director Cummings. President Johnson signed the law which designated a proposed National Library of Medicine Annex as the Lister Hill National Center for Biomedical Communications.

It is eminently fitting that this history of the National Library of Medicine be produced on the 25th anniversary of the bill Senators Lister Hill and John F. Kennedy submitted on March 13, 1956, "To promote the progress of medicine and to advance the national health and welfare by creating a National Library of Medicine."

If the ghosts of our ancestors, lineal, literary and bibliographical, could review the state of their works and the state of the art today they would swell with satisfaction. Lovell, Billings, Fletcher, Garrison, Phalen, Ashburn, Hume and many others whose work was often little noticed or appreciated, made this library possible. Fortunately McNinch, Rogers and the contemporary team, Cummings, Blake, Olch, Corning, and the rest can admire the labor of love, skill and endurance of Wyndham Miles, another milestone in the history of a great, perhaps *the* great, medical library.

I conclude with a personal note: One does not have to have done exhaustive biographical or bibliographical work to recognize the vast undertaking this volume represents. One can only have profound admiration for the happy conjunction of the task and the person chosen to perform it. In addition to the interminable hours of seeking and finding, checking, collating, and correlating, Wyndham Miles had a sharp eye out for Walter Reed material. Every so often he would send to me some missed item which I would add to the collected papers, works, and writings which I have been assembling and which rest in the Alderman Library at the University of Virginia.

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August 1981

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