

BUDGET

October 29, 2002

1 - Ainsworth Rand Spofford.John Diehl

2 - 102nd Anniversary Observance

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Ainsworth Rand Spofford



A. R. Spofford

In the pleasant task, as club historian, of browsing through old records and archives for several years, I've become more and more impressed with Ainsworth Rand Spofford's guiding role in the establishment and solid beginnings of the Literary

Club. If any of the twelve original members, the so-called 'immortals', can be singled out as our Founding Father, I'm sure Spofford deserves that honor. It seems appropriate for the Club record, to gather together at least a summary of the pertinent facts about this man so that we may better appreciate what he has done for us - a bit of his life history, his activities during his stay in Cincinnati and his remarkable accomplishments after he left the city. Hence, this brief paper this evening.

Ainsworth Rand Spofford was born on September 12, 1825 at Gilmanton, New Hampshire, son of Rev. Luke Ainsworth Spofford and Grata Rand. He died at Holderness, New Hampshire over 83 years later on August 11, 1908. When Ainsworth was a youngster of seven or eight, his father, a staunch, old-fashioned Presbyterian¹ minister, accepted a call from a small congregation in the old town of Chilmark on Martha's Vineyard, and moved there with his wife and three young children. It is difficult today to picture the bleak isolation of the area around Chilmark where Ainsworth spent his early years. The habits of the farmers and fishermen, who made up the population, were extremely primitive. Most depended almost solely on their own hard work and ingenuity for a meager existence. Money was scarce and prospects for a better future quite dim. The more enterprising shipped off on whalers spending most of their lives at sea. Even some three decades later, in 1862, when Spofford and his friend and fellow Literary Club member, Henry Blackwell went to visit his boyhood haunts and his father's old parishioners, conditions had improved but little. There was still no public ferry service to the island. They engaged a sailboat to cross the sound from New Bedford and had to spend their ten days on the island in the Gayhead lighthouse for lack of better accommodations.

Spofford spent several years of his early boyhood on this bleak, secluded island. He gathered berries in the summer to pay for books and often trudged through snow to school in the winter. He was a studious,

aspiring lad. Encouraged by his father, he was an avid reader and from his early youth, nurtured the love of books, an abiding interest he cherished throughout his life. His formal education consisted of sporadic sessions at the local school in Chilmark, private tutoring at home and attendance at Williston Seminary intending to matriculate to Amherst. But, physical problems at the time, with his eyes and lungs, prevented his attending college. However, in 1882, when his brilliant career was recognized, Amherst, with appropriate ceremony, conferred on him an honorary Doctor of Laws degree.

In 1844, at age nineteen, Spofford left home to seek his fortune in the booming metropolis of the West. Cincinnati, bustling with activity in commerce, music, the arts, publishing and with a growing population that included a fascinating variety of interesting, thoughtful people, suited him to a tee. He settled into lodgings at the Henrie House on Third Street. His love of books naturally attracted him to bookselling. He soon found a job as a clerk in E.D. Truman's bookshop on Main Street. After Mr. Truman died, a year or so later, he carried on the business for Truman's widow, Elizabeth, under the name of Truman and Spofford.

Attracted by Spofford's engaging personality and knowledge of books, the store on Main Street soon became the informal gathering place for a number of young men of scholarly taste. They loved books and sprightly conversation and enjoyed exploring each other's minds. It was there that our Literary Club was conceived. The original meeting was held in the bookstore in late October 1849. Committees were appointed to draft a constitution and select a topic for a debate at the new society. The meeting held in Nelson Cross' office on October 29, 1849, from which we date our anniversaries, was actually held to confirm what had transpired at that first meeting of the embryonic Club in the bookstore a few days earlier. Henry Blackwell, in a speech² he made at Spofford's

memorial meeting in Washington in 1908, said, "I first met Mr. Spofford at his store in 1848. He was then 23 years old. Soon afterwards he organized among his friends and acquaintances the Cincinnati Literary Club, of which it was my privilege to become a member."³

In 1852 Spofford married Miss Sarah Partridge and settled in a small, comfortable house on Walnut Hills. They had at least one child, a daughter who was a real comfort in his old age. As the anti-slavery conflict thickened, Spofford and many of his Literary Club cohorts became avid free-soilers. In 1855 Spofford went as a delegate to the Philadelphia convention, which nominated John C. Fremont on a platform opposing any further admission of slave states, and made a highly commended speech there.⁴

In 1859, Spofford became associate editor of the *Cincinnati Commercial*. In 1861, he was dispatched, by the paper, as a Civil War correspondent, to report on the First Battle of Bull Run. While in Washington, he visited Reuben Stephenson, his friend, fellow Literary Club forty-niner and then Librarian of Congress. That visit proved to be the pivotal point in Spofford's illustrious career. Stephenson needed an assistant and urged Spofford to apply for the position. Spofford, more interested in working with books than newspapers, had been toying with the idea and pursuing preliminary negotiations to acquire an antiquarian bookstore in Boston, at the time. He decided, with little hesitation however, to follow Stephenson's suggestion, applied for the job and became the Assistant Librarian of Congress. Stephenson resigned in 1864. Spofford was chosen over a slate of other applicants and was appointed by President Lincoln as Chief Librarian of Congress. He held the position with great distinction for thirty-three years until 1897, when because of failing health, he resigned as Chief but continued to serve graciously and fruitfully as Assistant Librarian until his death in 1908. He was the perfect man to fill a very special niche in the government.

When Spofford took the reins, the only libraries of national importance were in Boston and other eastern cities. The country was almost wholly dependent on these New England collections for its literary wealth. There were eight other Government libraries in Washington, in addition to the Library of Congress, a library for each Executive Department. Total number of volumes for the nine libraries was barely 125,000, few of them rare and many duplicates. The Library of Congress had 63,000, half the total. Its most valuable collection was the library of President Jefferson. The library staff numbered only five with a total payroll of \$9,000 including a salary of \$2,160 for Spofford. The total annual appropriation for books was \$7,000. At the end of Spofford's administration, the collection had increased sixteen times to over a million volumes, but the staff only eight times, the salary roll only seven times and the appropriation for books barely doubled.

Spofford, as Librarian, was primarily a collector of books. In an article he published in 1897, *The Function of a National Library*⁵, Spofford gave seven points of his philosophy on what such a library should be - a philosophy he painstakingly followed to make the Library of Congress the magnificent institution it became under his guidance. He wrote,

"First, every nation should have, at its capital city, all the books that its authors have produced, in perpetual evidence of its literary history and progress - or retrogression, as the case may be. Secondly, this complete assemblage of our literature is an inestimable boon to authors and publishers, many of whose books, after years have elapsed, may owe to such a collection their sole chance of preservation. Thirdly, it is a most valuable aid to would-be writers to have access to all the works that have been published in the special field they seek to cultivate. Fourthly, one comprehensive library - inclusive and not exclusive - should exist, because all other libraries must be in a greater or less degree exclusive. Fifthly, all

American books should be preserved as models - even if many of them are models to be avoided. One frequently learns as much from the failures of others, as from their successes. Sixthly, it is already provided by law (a law he strongly lobbied to have enacted), that all copyright publications of whatever character, shall be deposited in the Library of Congress. Finally, there is no standard of selection or of exclusion that could be adopted which would stand against the fact of the endlessly varying judgments of different men, or even of the same men at different periods. What is pronounced trash today may have an unexpected value hereafter, and the unconsidered trifles of the press of the nineteenth century may prove highly curious and interesting to the twentieth, as examples of what the ancestors of the men of that day wrote and thought about."

As to the periodicals published in the country, it was clear that it would be not only difficult to collect, but impossible to preserve all. He concluded that the national library should acquire and preserve only the more important. 1- all American reviews and magazines, 2- the daily newspapers of the larger cities of the country and 3 - two, at least, of the most widely circulated journals of each state and territory of the Union, representing each political party. He also initiated a reciprocal agreement with other nations to acquire important foreign material for the library.

As the collections multiplied the need for space increased with them. Spofford fought for more room throughout his administration. The Library of Congress originally was in cramped quarters in the Capitol building. In 1865 he managed to get two more rooms, each holding 75,000 books. In 1871 temporary wooden shelving was added for another 50,000 volumes. In his reports for 1871 and 1872 he urged consideration of a new, separate, ample building. As a result, by an act of March 3, 1873, Congress authorized a committee, including Spofford, to study the matter. Arguments,

bickering and negotiations went on for thirteen years before Congress authorized a separate structure for the library by an act of April 15, 1886. After eleven more frustrating years, the building was finally completed in 1897. It was the crowning triumph of Spofford's career. 470 ft. long, 340 ft. wide, 195 ft. high, beautifully designed with great halls and spacious stacks, it realized his fondest dreams.

To assist Congressmen in their researches was the first duty of the librarian. Their questions were sometimes easy to answer, and at other times difficult, if not impossible. It was the librarian's task to answer all alike with the same intelligence and courtesy. Spofford's success in this respect became the subject of many stories regarding the wealth of his knowledge, his prodigious memory and the readiness of his wit. In his *Book For All Readers*, Spofford wrote:

"I have been asked, almost at the same time, to refer a reader to the origin of Candlemasday, to define the Pragmatic sanction, to give, out of hand, the aggregate wealth of Great Britain compared with a half dozen other nations, to define the limits of neutrality or belligerent rights, to explain what is meant by the Gresham law, to tell what ship made the quickest voyage to Europe, when she made it, and what the time was, to elucidate the meaning of the Carolina Doctrine, to explain the character and objects of the Knights of the Golden Circle, to tell how large are the endowments of the British universities, to give the origin of the custom of egg rolling, to tell the meaning of the cipher dispatches, to explain who was "Extra Billy Smith", to tell the aggregate number killed on all sides during the Napoleonic wars, to certify who wrote the *Vestiges of Creation*, or, finally, to give the author of one of those innumerable ancient proverbs which float about the world without a father."

Spofford was a busy man. In addition to running the library, the list of his publications, official and otherwise fills 23 typewritten pages. He loathed

interruptions while at work in his office, by people with time on their hands. In a paper read at a meeting of the American Library Association, he included his recipe against bores:

"The bore," he wrote, "is commonly one who having little or nothing to do, inflicts himself upon the busy persons of his acquaintance, and especially upon the ones he credits with knowing the most, to wit, the librarians. Receive him courteously, but keep on steadily at the work you are doing when he enters. If you are skillful, you can easily do two things at once; for example, answer your idler friend or your bore, and revise titlecards, or mark a catalogue or collate a book, or look up a quotation, or write a letter, at the same time. Never lose your good humor, never say that your time is valuable, or that you are very busy; never hint at his going away; but never quit your work, answer questions cheerfully, and keep on, allowing nothing to take your eyes off your business. By and by he will take the hint, if he's not wholly pachydermatous, and go away of his own accord. By pursuing this course, I have saved infinite time, and got rid of infinite bores, by one and the same process."

Besides remarkable persistence and indomitable industry, Spofford was gifted with an amazing memory. Press notices concerning him uniformly dwelt on the marvels of his memory. In reading, Spofford developed a habit of absolute attention and explained that, for him, the memory of a thing read, followed as (a matter) of course. Over a hundred years ago, Literary Club member, Cornelius Cadle wrote a very short budget paper⁶ about Spofford's memory, that bears repeating.

"When General Wallace was writing *Ben Hur*, he looked through many libraries for a description of the internal economy of the ancient Roman galley.

"Failing in this research he went, as who would not, to a member of the Literary Club, Ainsworth R.

Spofford. Mr. Spofford ran over mentally, his experience of forty years and said, 'There is such a description; wait and let me bring the book and its location to my mind. It is more than thirty years since I saw in the Public Library in Boston, a pamphlet in old black letter German, written and printed when type was almost new - giving just what you want. Let me think slowly and I can, I am sure, send you right to the book.'

"Describing fully all these locations, Mr. Spofford said, 'In a certain room in the Boston Library, upon a certain side of the room, in such an alcove, upon such a shelf and the third book from the right hand end of that shelf, was a bound volume of pamphlets, and in that volume is the description of what you want.'

"General Wallace went at once to Boston, saw the librarian, who said that he had been on duty more than thirty years but knew of no such book. But, the librarian followed Mr. Spofford's directions to General Wallace, and upon the identical shelf and the third book from the right, in the room and alcove described by Mr. Spofford, was a bound volume of pamphlets, with the dust of years upon it, and one of the pamphlets was in black letter German, describing the internal economy of the ancient Roman galley."

Despite his demanding work as Librarian of Congress, Spofford was able to find time for other important activities in Washington. He naturally had an interest in the Literary Society⁷ there, founded in 1873. He was president of the society in 1884. He read nineteen papers with a variety of fascinating titles during his membership.

During his fifteen years as a member of the Anthropological Society⁸ in Washington, he produced a paper each year, a number of them published in *The American Anthropologist* - "The Virginia Aborigines as Seen by the Early Colonists", "The Spanish Race Today",

"The Folklore of Popular Sayings" are a few of his titles.

In 1894, Spofford was one of the eleven founding members of the Historical Society of the city of Washington.⁹ He got the society off to a sound beginning with his address on "The Methods and Aims of Historical Inquiry" at the inaugural ceremony of the society. He read seven papers in his thirteen years as a member - "The Life and Labors of Peter Force", "The Lyric Element in American History", "The Eloquence of Congress - Historic Notes" among them. And the last on April 8th 1908, shortly before his death, when, too ill to stand, he read from his chair, "Virginia Three Hundred Years Ago".

The Public Library¹⁰ in Washington was founded in 1896 and Spofford had much to do with it. He felt the need for a circulating library in the District in addition to the Library of Congress. He petitioned Congress for its establishment. He served as a trustee, chairman of the book committee and warm, effective friend of the Washington Public Library until his death.

Spofford, with his industry, his enthusiasm, his intellectual and literary ability, his steadfastness of purpose and his world-famous memory, was a commanding figure. He displayed these same formidable characteristics in the founding of our Literary Club. John Herron, one of the 1849 "Immortals", knew Spofford well. He wrote a short budget paper about him in 1894, in which he said:

"As a member of this Club, he (Spofford) had probably more to do with its first success than any other one man, if not more than all the rest put together. The original constitution is in his handwriting. He was always present. He never failed in a duty. He would fill any vacancy at a moment's notice. He would give a recitation, prepare a paper,

join in a debate, prepare a lunch - and was always genial, cordial and interesting.

"His success in life has been great in its usefulness and he has well deserved it. He was unwavering in his devotion to what he believed to be the truth and right. He was ever ready to attack wrong and injustice. He knew not what it was to fail. The morning after defeat he was as cheerfully and vigorously in the fight as if the battle had been won. This Club has never had on its list a more vigorous and determined worker."¹

I think all of you will agree that Ainsworth Rand Spofford deserves a warm and grateful place in our hearts.

¹ John Herron in a Literary Club paper of June 30th 1894, writes that Rev. Luke Spofford was a Congregational minister, and Henry Blackwell, in a memorial address for Ainsworth Spofford at the Library of Congress in 1908 said that Rev. Luke Spofford was a Presbyterian minister. I think, lacking further research to resolve the matter, that Blackwell, a closer friend and associate of Ainsworth was probably correct. Literary Club Papers Vol. 10 Pp 372-374

² Henry B. Blackwell, *Dr. Spofford in Cincinnati 1845-1860* [Ainsworth Rand Spofford/1825-1903/A Memorial Meeting/at the/Library of Congress/On Thursday, November 12th, 1908/at Four O'clock/The Librarian of Congress Presiding.] Printed for the Columbia Library Association by The Webster Press, New York City, 1909. (Subsequently listed in notes as Memorial Meeting.)

³ Memorial Meeting: p 17

⁴ Memorial meeting: pp 20-21

⁵ W. Dawson Johnston, in his address, Dr. Spofford and the Library of Congress, 1861-1897 includes a quote from Spofford's article: Memorial Meeting Pp 23-24

⁶ Cornelius Cadle, Accuracy of Mr. Spofford's Memory June 26th 1897 Literary Club Papers Vol 19 P 1, 193

⁷ Alice C. Fletcher, Dr. Spofford as a Member of the Literary Society, Memorial Meeting Pp 40-45

⁸ Walter Hough, Dr. Spofford as a member of the Anthropological Society, Memorial Meeting Pp 46-51

⁹ Alexander B. Hagner, Dr. Spofford as a Member of the Historical Society, Memorial Meeting Pp 52-58

¹⁰ Theodore W. Noyes: Dr. Spofford and the Public Library of the District, Memorial Meeting Pp 36-39

¹¹ John Herron budget paper June 20th 1894. Literary Club papers Vol 10 Pp 372-374