

CINCINNATI'S LITTLE KNOWN RENAISSANCE MANNovember 22, 1999Joseph S. Stern, Jr.

Ever since the Main Branch of the Public Library expanded in 1982 and 1997, making it, at once, an imposing and beautiful addition to downtown Cincinnati, I have often been asked, as a long-time Library trustee, "Where did you people get the money to do all this?", and, I might add parenthetically, at no direct cost to the citizens of Hamilton County.

At a meeting of the Cincinnati Association on June 8, 1982 I presented a short history of the Public Library which I would like to bring up to date tonight and to pay tribute to Rufus King, "Father of the Public Library."

Cincinnati, from its very beginning, has been blessed by individual men and women who cared about the city and would work for it. Many of the original settlers were persons of culture and refinement. In February 1802, a group of such citizens met in Yeatman's tavern for the purpose of organizing a town library. The committee included such civic-minded citizens as Jacob Burnet, Martin Baum and Louis Kerr. General Arthur St. Clair, first governor of the Northwest Territory, became the first subscriber at \$10 a share. The meeting resulted in a library of 300 volumes.

A Library Society was organized in 1808 and incorporated in 1813. The incomparable Dr. Daniel Drake, President of the Society, moved its collection, then up to 1,500 volumes, to the new Cincinnati College.

Then followed specialty libraries: The Apprentices Library, Ohio Mechanic's Institute Library, etc. - each private.

Boston gets credit for having the first American Public Library when it opened a public reading room in 1854, but actually the State of Ohio was earlier when

it enacted a public and school library law in 1853. This resulted in quarters being leased in the Mechanics Institutes Building at Sixth and Vine in 1854. 1/10 of a mill on \$1.00 of property valuation was provided for support. Volumes rose to 11,630. The fledgling Public Library ran into rough times almost before it started. The State tax was suspended in 1857, revived in 1858 and repealed in 1860. Funds were exhausted by 1863, but through the tireless efforts of Rufus King, the State enacted legislation in 1867 permitting city boards of education power to levy a City tax replacing the State tax. King became first President of the Library Board; the collection then exceeded 20,000 volumes.

The following year, when an ambitious plan to build an opera house on Vine Street between 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> collapsed, the Board of Education was quick to buy the site, upon which \$83,000 in construction had already been spent. An architect was engaged to plan a library on the opera house foundations.

In 1869, William F. Poole, the famous bibliographer and former librarian of the Boston Athenaeum was persuaded to come to Cincinnati as Director of the Public Library, which moved to the front section of the new building in 1870. Poole set up a new card catalogue and also began a great rare book collection from donations received from library-minded citizens (an early Friends of the Public Library) and from his own budget. He was able to buy a magnificent Audubon Elephant Folio for \$1,000 and was criticized by many for misuse of public funds. Infuriated, he resigned and went to Chicago as Director of its public library. The Elephant Folio is now worth \$4 million. A rare first edition of Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass was bought for \$2.87. In 1992, it sold at auction for \$25,000.

The new building, constructed at a cost of \$383,000, was dedicated February 25, 1874. It's most conspicuous feature was the huge main hall surrounded by four tiers of balconies. At that time it was said to be the most magnificent and imposing library building in the country.

Then followed several years of troubled relations between the Board of Education and the Library. The Library chafed under rule by the Board of Education; it wanted to run its own show. It got a break in 1893 when the Board of Education moved its offices away from the Library building for the first time.

In 1898, the Ohio Legislature passed the County Library Law. This was a landmark occasion for Ohio libraries. For the first time, the Library Board became independent. Its seven members were appointed as provided by law, and the President of the Board of Education ceased to be an ex-officio member. 2/10 of a mill was allowed for support. The librarian recommended that service be extended to suburban residents of the whole of Hamilton County.

Now operating as a county library system, the Public Library absorbed the village libraries of Harrison, Hartwell, Lockland, Madisonville, Pleasant Ridge and Wyoming.

In most of the other major counties in Ohio, the principal city did not absorb the suburban libraries. There are nine library boards in Cuyahoga County (Cleveland) and seven in Franklin County (Columbus) - making for unnecessary duplications and squabbling for a fair share of the budget "pie." Hamilton County (Cincinnati) and Lucas County (Toledo) are the only "majors" with a single county system.

In April 1902, Andrew Carnegie gave the first of his famous public library grants. \$180,000 was allocated to Hamilton County for six branch libraries, Walnut Hills being the first. 4/10 of a mill was allowed for support. Also around this time, special rooms for children were added as well as service for the blind.

Another Ohio library landmark occurred in 1931 when the late Senator Robert A. Taft, then a State Senator, introduced a unique bill in the Ohio Legislature. It was during the Great Depression. Taft's bill proposed a tax on individuals and corporations to benefit principally, the public library system; "The poor man's university" - Taft called it.

What resulted was the Intangible Tax, a 5% tax on stocks and bonds. The County library system had first call on this tax. Ohio was the only state in the Union which had it, and Hamilton County did the best job of any of the 88 counties in Ohio in collecting it. In many counties the tax was evaded because of lax enforcement, but in Hamilton County it was enforced (administrators had only to check Federal Income Tax returns to ascertain whether individuals and corporations had income from stocks and bonds). It was because of this law - the Intangibles Tax - and its enforcement that Hamilton County was able to build a superior library system. But being the only State in the U.S. to have it, it was generally misunderstood and so, as we shall see, was finally abandoned.

Demand for service grew, an expanded Main Library was needed. In 1933, 1935, 1936 and 1938 bond issues were proposed. Each lost but in 1944 the voters approved \$3,500,000. Plans were begun for site selection; the corner of 8th and Vine was chosen. In November 1948, a supplementary bond issue for \$12,500,000 failed. It was during this bond issue that I became interested in the Public Library. The Queen City Association, formed right after World War II by a group of civic-minded "Young Turks," who thought The Cincinnati Association was too stodgy, came out for the bond issue. Jack Nolan headed a speaker's committee, of which I was a member, to promote the issue. I remember speaking at Clifton School, among other places. The bond issue went down in Clifton by a larger margin than in any other area.

Under the exceptional guidance of Carl Vitz, librarian and Woody Garber, architect, construction on the new library began in 1952. (Plans had to be trimmed when the supplementary bond issue failed). The new building was dedicated in 1954, at a cost of \$4,620,000 as a memorial to Hamilton County's war dead of the twentieth century. It remains so today; a Veteran's Day Service is an annual feature of the Library's calendar.

Again, as in 1874, Cincinnatians were more surprised by their new library than anyone else. "Familiar in the conservative structures, they had

looked doubtfully at the sweeping modern lines of the new building, but once inside, they succumbed with delighted amazement to the comfortable, convenient and colorful charm of a library for today and the future." (Ernest I. Miller, former Librarian). "I never dreamed," said one visitor, "that all this was here, I thought it was just a library."

And here it is, 28 years later, a breathtaking new addition to the Main Library, constructed without a bond issue, all paid for because of the tireless efforts of a great many dedicated people. It's still quite a library.

That was 1982, but let me bring you up to date. The 1982 addition "wrapped around" the original building, creating a five-story central atrium crowned by a glass roof. The new structure housed the third largest reference and research collections of major libraries in the U.S., surpassed only by the New York Public Library and the one in Boston. The Library ranked first in circulation per capita among the majors and second lowest in cost per item circulated. These extraordinary statistics remained until 1998 when the Denver Public Library nosed out ours.

Now for a little spice.

In order to build the new addition, the Library Board had to acquire the property fronting on Vine Street and on Ninth. It took several years to accomplish this acquisition. Among the pieces acquired was the old Gaiety Burlesque House. Fond memories of our youth were recalled to us oldsters in a "Farewell Party at the Gaiety" complete with strippers and burlesque music.

One of the pieces of acquired property on Ninth Street was the old Morton Hotel, a "hot-pillow" establishment conveniently located right behind the Gaiety. Before it was razed Peeping Tom voyeurs could look out from the back of the third floor of the library onto the windows at the back of the Morton Hotel which were often indiscreetly left with the blinds only partly pulled down. I remember it well!

In 1986 the much misunderstood Intangibles Tax was repealed, but in its place 6.3% of the State budget supported by the collection of State income taxes was earmarked for the support of the Public Library System. Allocation to the eighty-eight counties was apportioned in relation to how the intangible tax was collected. Since Hamilton County enforced this tax much better than any other, it benefited under the new allocation. Cuyahoga County has almost twice as many residents as Hamilton County, but gets only 14% more dollars to support its libraries; Franklin County with 15% more residents received only one-half the dollars Hamilton County receives.

By the late 1980's public demand for downtown library services and dramatic new information processing and handling advances had stretched the Main Library to the limits. In 1988 plans for a third expansion began. In each year's budget a dollar amount was allocated for capital improvements. On January 15, 1997 this new expansion was dedicated and completely paid for.

But this won't last forever. Jealousies developed. The growing rural counties want more. On August 16, 1999 the Enquirer reported that Rep. Gary Cates from West Chester, Warren County, who had been trying to change the complex formula, had temporarily given us, but - the 6.3% is now down to 5.7%. Hopefully Governor Bob Taft will remember what his grandfather did back in the 1930's. But in the meantime, we have a system, a showpiece of technology, featuring the new Children's Learning Center that we can all be proud of.

Now, to Rufus King.

He had a truly "Founding Fathers" kind of background. He was named after his grandfather, Rufus King, Harvard '77 = 1777, that is, a distinguished Federalist, anti-slavery Statesman, Minister to Great Britain, and one of the signers of the final draft of the 1787 Federal Constitutional Convention.

Born in Maine, King had moved to New York in 1786 to marry Mary Alsop, the daughter of a wealthy, upper crust merchant. There he entered politics and in 1789

was elected Senator from New York and soon became, perhaps, the ablest Federalist in the Senate, upholding Alexander Hamilton in all financial matters.

Rufus King's fourth son, Edward, also went to Harvard, but left the security of his family connections in New York in 1815 to take his chances "out west." He settled in Chillicothe, Ohio, then the State Capital, as a land speculator and lawyer and quickly met the "right people." These included Sarah Worthington, daughter of Thomas Worthington, the governor. After a whirlwind courtship, Edward married Sarah who was only sixteen. Their first child, named Rufus in honor of his grandfather, was born in Chillicothe, Friday, May 30, 1817.

Edward was ambitious. When the State Capital moved from Ross County to Columbus in 1830, the Kings moved their home to the bustling, growing city of Cincinnati, where he was quickly recognized as an outstanding lawyer. He was also active in the State Militia where he was popularly known as "General King." Elected to the State Legislature, he was soon promoted to Speaker of the House.

In 1833 Edward helped establish the Cincinnati Law School, the first attempt in the Mississippi Valley at a systematic legal education. Unfortunately, Edward died in 1836, aged 40, at the height of his influence, but he left a memorable legacy to his son, Rufus, and four younger children, Thomas, Edward, James and Mary Alsop. The family lived in a house on Fourth Street.

It was a good time to be in Cincinnati which was fast establishing itself as an attractive, growing community (population 35,000 in 1835) with excellent schools, theaters, hotels, a considerable literary movement and other cultural activities. Charles Dickens, writing several years later, described Cincinnati as "a beautiful city, cheerful, thriving and animated. . .I've not seen a place that commends itself so favorably to a stranger at first glance as this place does."

It was in this heady atmosphere that "our" Rufus grew up. "Our Rufus" is not to be confused with

baseball's Rufus King, Jr., son of his brother, Thomas, and centerfielder on the Cincinnati Baseball Club of 1868 or "Vatican" Rufus, his cousin, named after his grandfather the original Rufus and U.S. Ambassador to the Papal states in 1868, who angrily resigned when the anti-Catholic Congress refused to appropriate funds to continue the Ambassadorship.

Rufus grew up under the watchful eye of his mother, Sarah, daughter of Thomas Worthington the abolitionist Governor of Ohio. A woman of intense energy and charm, she founded the Woman's Academy of Fine Arts among other things. Rufus went to Woodward High School in downtown Cincinnati, but while still in his middle teens, she sent him to Gambier, Ohio for education under Bishop Chase who founded Kenyon College.

In the summer of 1835, however, Rufus went east to take examinations for Harvard College, the alma mater of his father and grandfather. Sarah wanted him to be comfortably settled in Cambridge, so she accompanied her son that first summer.

They were passengers on two different steamboats to Wheeling, West Virginia, which was on the National Road. There, they boarded a coach and traveled east into Maryland, north to Philadelphia and on to Boston. With his mother's help, Rufus found a room in a boarding house near Harvard Yard, the heart of the college. King took his entrance exams August 28 and was admitted to Sophomore standing. Gambier and Woodward had prepared him well. He was the first person from Cincinnati to do so.

In 1835 Harvard College had a student population of 210 of which a good two-thirds came from what we term today "Greater Boston." 156 came from Massachusetts and nine from across the mountains, three each from Ohio, Kentucky and Louisiana. There were 66 men in King's class.

The Harvard that King entered was already 200 years old. It had been transformed from an ingrown provincial Puritan institution to an extraordinarily successful but not happy place. Expanding financially,

physically, socially and intellectually, the students, most representative of the old Boston families, were alive with new interests. However, because of a rigid formal curriculum, they were rarely able to express their thoughts. This often resulted in open rebellion. There were frequent student riots and class-cutting was the rule. Long, free afternoon hours resulted in loafing around Boston, smoking, drinking and whoring. I've always maintained that "people do the same things, there's just a new crowd doing them."

Rufus King survived this atmosphere handsomely. Though a Westerner, he had the right background, he joined a fraternity and earned a law degree in 1838. He stayed on in Cambridge for two more years studying law at Dane Law School and returned to Cincinnati in 1841. An ardent Whig, representing conservative interests - high tariff, National Bank - he quickly became a successful lawyer, and, an eligible bachelor.

King's life took a sudden change when the steamboat Paragon arrived on the Cincinnati waterfront in the summer of 1842. On board was Dr. Landon Rives, a prominent Virginian, returning from New Orleans to his home in Nelson County. Rives was accompanied by his two daughters - Anne and Margaret - and thought, while docked overnight, that it would be nice for the girls, each of marriageable age, to enjoy some male company. He asked a good friend of his, Nicholas Longworth, among the most prominent citizens in town, if he could arrange to find two agreeable and entertaining gentlemen to come on board for the evening.

Longworth asked his son, Joseph, to be one and he agreed and brought along his good friend, the young and upcoming lawyer, Rufus King. The evening went well and the upshot was that Anne Rives eventually married Joseph Longworth and Margaret married Rufus, May 18, 1843. King and Longworth therefore became brothers-in-law, and the facilities and hospitality of the famous Longworth home, Rookwood, in Hyde Park, became available to King as an integral facet of his social life. In later years there was a family Fourth of July party, complete with fireworks, iced watermelon and

highlighted by patriotic reminiscences delivered by "Uncle" Rufus.

The young married couple became active in the social and cultural life of Cincinnati as part of the Grandin Road crowd. In 1861 the Prince of Wales visited Cincinnati. Rufus King and Bellamy Storer were his hosts as they drove through Mt. Storm Park in Clifton. He was developing a large and lucrative practice.

But it was as a civic-minded lawyer that Rufus began to shine. After his death in 1891, Judge Cox described King in an article in The Green Bag - a useless but entertaining magazine for lawyers - "Mr. King was an admirable example of the thoroughly equipped lawyer devoted to his profession and steadily giving himself up to its private practice despite many and frequent temptations to enter public life. . ."

An example of this kind of thinking soon developed when King was asked to take the place of Judge Gholson on the Ohio Supreme Court, but he declined. He was also asked to be on City Council. He accepted initially, but was really not interested in political life and soon resigned. But there was one class of duty he did not decline. This was the care and direction of public education. In 1851 he was elected one of the Trustees of the Public School System, and on the resignation of Judge Bellamy Storer, he became President of the Board, a position he held for fifteen years. During that period he was instrumental in the development of an orderly system of "graded education" from primary school through high school.

In the realm of higher education, King became a Director of the University of Cincinnati in 1869 - the successor to the McMicken bequest to start a university and of which King was a Trustee. He continued on the Board until 1887, serving as President in 1871 and 1872. Finally, when the venerable Judge Bellamy Storer resigned his chair as Dean of the University of Cincinnati Law School in 1874, King succeeded Storer as Dean and Professor of Real Estate Law. One of his principal interests was the Law Library which was housed in the Courthouse. When the Courthouse was

consumed by fire during the 1884 riots, the Law Library was almost completely destroyed. King immediately took the initiative to restore it with a \$4,000 gift from his own funds, a most generous gift for that time.

But his most important civic service - tied closely to his interest in education - was his leadership in founding the Public Library. The steps leading up to it are described in the first part of this paper - Ohio's enactment of a public and school library law in 1853 - King's tireless efforts to secure funding, and, in 1867, a quasi-independent Library Board. King became the first President of the newly formed Board of Trustees. But the library was still tied to the Board of Education.

King tried to free it of this encumbrance, but in 1891 at the time of his death, he had not achieved his goal. As described earlier, it was not until 1898 when the Ohio Legislature passed the County Library law that the library threw off the yoke of the Board of Education and became an independent entity. Smiling down from above, King would have been happy. Now, one hundred years later, our Public Library still operates under this law. It is a county-wide library with a seven member Board appointed alternately by the County Commissioners and Common Pleas Judges for seven year terms.

When one delves into the history of what was going on in Cincinnati in the later half of the nineteenth century, Rufus King's name pops up in leadership positions everywhere; he was immensely popular.

He was a director of the Commercial Bank, the leading bank of the time. He took part in the development of the city owned rail link to the south, the Cincinnati section of the Southern Railroad and for a time was its President.

The Harvard Club of Cincinnati was founded in 1869 at the home of John Kebler '39. Rufus King chaired the initial meeting, was offered the Presidency, but graciously declined in favor of Larz Anderson who had preceded him at Harvard (when he was a resident of Louisville.)

Among the 23 men who signed the Club's first minute book was Rufus King, Jr. '67 and until recently I thought he was "our Rufus'" son, but he wasn't. The Kings had no children. Rufus King, Jr. was the son of Thomas W., a brother of Rufus and he tacked on a "Junior," not for his uncle but for the original Rufus. I also thought "our Rufus" was one of the founders of the Cincinnati Baseball Club in 1867. His picture appears on the original roster. But, again, it was not "our Rufus" but Rufus, Jr. Had I thought about it carefully, I would have questioned how a man born in 1817 could be playing baseball in 1867.

To continue the saga: When Spring Grove Cemetery was formally organized in 1878, King was elected to the Board. He is buried there along with dozens of other Cincinnatians - like Nicholas Longworth, Cincinnati's first millionaire, his grandson, Nicholas Longworth, Speaker of the House, William McGuffey, Author of the McGuffey readers, Agnes Thatcher "Calamity Jane," wife of Wild Bill Hickock, Joseph Hooker, Union General, "Heine" Groh, baseball player and Miller Huggins, Manager of the New York Yankees - to name just a few.

And not to neglect the arts. When Clara Bauer and Theodore Thomas started a College of Music in 1873, King was on the financial committee that made it possible.

And a little later, the Women's Academy of Fine Arts, predecessor to the Art Museum was founded by King's mother, Sarah Peter - she had remarried after Edward King died in 1843. Rufus King was a major financial backer and helped to raise funds to sponsor budding Cincinnati artists like Henry Farny and John Twachtman.

After the Courthouse riots of 1884 clearly pointed up the need for local government reform, King was one of the original committee to achieve this purpose.

He kept right on going right up to the time of his death, March 21, 1891 at the family residence on East Third Street. The Cincinnati Gazette of March 26, 1891 described King as "The Library's Founder" and went on "Peaceful death of Hon. Rufus King, Philanthropist,

Scholar, Lawyer and Patriot. . .Cincinnati mourns one of her best friends, a good and great man. . ."

In her 1939 book "Cincinnati, the Story of the Queen City," Clara Longworth de Chambrun, commenting on King's death wrote "Cincinnati has lost her leading citizen" and went on to quote Emerson "Every great institution is the length and shadow of a single man." She was referring to the great institutions King nurtured: the Law School, the Library, the Board of Education, et al.

Unfortunately, today Rufus King's name is lost in history. But he was one of those citizens I wrote about at the beginning of this paper who make Cincinnati the great and desirable place it is.

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BUDGET

November 29, 1999

- 1 - Ars Gratia Gratuity. . . . . Frank G. Davis
- 2 - Oh My Yes. . . . . Holden Wilson, Jr.
- 3 - The Penultimate Party. . . . . Lewis G. Gatch

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Ars Gratia Gratuity

"Another towel please, MACHELLE"