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# A Cultural Barometer: The St. Louis Mercantile Library as National Institution, 1846-1871

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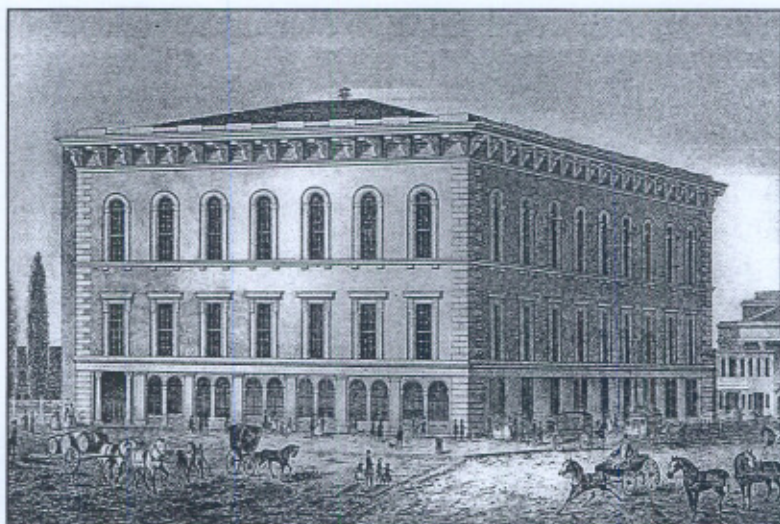
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# A Cultural Barometer: The St. Louis Mercantile Library as National Institution, 1846-1871

ADAM ARENSEN\*



*The St. Louis Mercantile  
Library, ca. 1852*  
[SHSMO 027535]

On April 11, 1870, the president of the St. Louis Mercantile Library Association, the dry-goods merchant Richard M. Scruggs, wrote to Washington with urgent news: there was an open-water route to the North Pole. His letter to Carl Schurz, senator from Missouri, on behalf of the whole association, explained that the scientific advance had been announced at a Mercantile Library lecture by Captain Silas Bent, a naval officer and son of a noted pioneer St. Louisian, who claimed that,

by his calculations, the Gulf Stream must create a "thermometric gateway" that would allow ships clear passage. "Recognising the importance of the results to science, commerce and navigation that would flow from a successful effort," Scruggs urged Schurz to put before Congress the lecture pamphlet printed by the Mercantile Library, along with earnest scientific reviews, so that the polar expedition under consideration could test "the true and only [routes] by which Ships can reach the Pole."<sup>1</sup>

It was a heady time in St. Louis. The city had recently been declared the fourth-largest city in the United States; the president, Ulysses S. Grant, was a St. Louisian; and Senator Schurz and Missouri Governor Benjamin Gratz Brown were transforming the landscape of Reconstruction America as active members of the Liberal Republican movement.<sup>2</sup> That year Hiram Leffingwell,

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a local real-estate developer, proposed a three thousand-acre Forest Park—almost twice its current size. Perhaps most radical were the ideas of Logan Reavis, who held a Capital Removal Convention at the Mercantile Library Hall in October 1869, advocating the transfer of the seat of government from Washington to St. Louis, which he called “the Future Great City of the World.”<sup>3</sup>

As it turned out, there was no water route to the North Pole, St. Louis was not the fourth-largest city (a later investigation revealed the fabrication), Leffingwell’s park was not approved, and the national capital stayed put in the District of Columbia. Yet by 1871 there was no doubt that St. Louis was a city of national influence, its cultural, political, scientific, and even leisure advances watched avidly across the country. And looking back after twenty-five years, it was clear that the St. Louis Mercantile Library had become a national institution: showplace for the arts, repository of history and culture, and the premier gathering place for St. Louisans with visions for the city’s future.

The St. Louis Mercantile Library, from its founding in 1846 to its twenty-fifth anniversary in 1871, demonstrated a growing influence on the local community and the national network of libraries and museums. Two recent developments make a reconsideration of that influence warranted. A generation ago, when the last histories of the library were written, the rich institutional archives had not been catalogued; its treasure trove of images and references were less accessible.<sup>4</sup> Since then, the Mercantile Library has moved to a spacious new home at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, and the advent of computerized record-keeping has revolutionized access to the collection.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, recent decades have also seen greater scholarly attention paid to libraries as centers of political and cultural development. These institutions actively shaped their communities and preserved the chosen version of their histories. Routes of trade and questions of politics are deeply connected to the exchange of books and artifacts; founders of libraries saw the gathering of facts and figures, documents and portraits as an essential part of city making, a task of memory as important as building a financial success. In New York, magnates like John Jacob Astor and John Pierpont Morgan oversaw the creation of cultural institutions; in London, Calcutta, and Vancouver, imperial administrators saw to it that key specimens from colonial lands were collected.<sup>6</sup> Libraries should be reconsidered as embodiments of knowledge as well as understood as functional spaces where entrepreneurs, merchants, and their aspiring clerks socialized in a “third place,” away from the demands of work or home.<sup>7</sup>

The Mercantile Library was founded in 1846, the same year the Smithsonian Institution was endowed; the library grew and changed at a time when no national system of museums existed. Its collections were not assembled as a local or regional antiquarian project, but to demonstrate the breadth of all world knowledge. Although mostly overlooked until now, the Mercantile Library’s archives reveal these connections: the visitor register contains the hasty scrawl of vaunted guests; letter books hold notes from the world’s great cultural figures; board minutes discuss momentous events; artifacts from national and international excursions fill the collection.

It is also worth noting that the library was founded the year the Mexican-American War began. At its end, two years later, the United States would gain





*Aside from his service to the Mercantile Library, Luther Kennett also served as mayor of St. Louis (1850-1853) and as a U.S. representative from Missouri (1855-1857). [SHSMO 011639]*

an immense territory, bringing St. Louis to the center of the nation. The city was an exceedingly diverse place, as free and enslaved blacks, Irish and German immigrants, and businessmen from up and down the East Coast populated a contentious, changing landscape. The Mercantile Library's members, from all of the white segments of St. Louis's population, championed the expansion, welcoming the grand designs of American empire under the banner of Manifest Destiny. This ideology shaped which local, sectional, and national trends would be reflected in the library's archive.<sup>8</sup>

The group who called for "a meeting of Merchants and others" and prepared a constitution and bylaws in February 1846 quickly demonstrated a savvy sense of what was needed for the Mercantile Library to succeed. The officers were elected from the group of fifteen who had called the meeting: James E. Yeatman, a commission merchant, was elected the first president; Luther Kennett, a lawyer and merchant then serving as a city alderman, was elected vice president. From the library's origins, Yeatman and Kennett stood among a circle of men with whom they shared business, political, religious, and family ties, and in creating the institution, they mirrored the actions of young businessmen and aspiring civic leaders throughout the United States.<sup>9</sup> Living on the same streets, these merchants each speculated in real estate, steamboats, and new business ventures, each socialized in the same Protestant churches, and each held a similar political philosophy, with the prophet of internal improvements, Whig Party leader Henry Clay, as their inspiration.<sup>10</sup> To court favor, a resolution "that all Clergymen and the Editors of the City of St. Louis, be allowed the privileges of the Reading Room" was passed at the first meeting. Noted local landowner Colonel John O'Fallon was soon offered a life membership, and the following year, continuing the trend, the state's senators and representatives were made honorary members. The association's constitution was explicit in setting out its mercantile goals: the library was for "clerks" and "proprietors," with "beneficiaries"—defined as "persons not engaged in mercantile pursuits"—allowed only with the approval of the board.<sup>11</sup>

Though membership soon grew to include wives and children, the effort to focus on the needs of the business community was integral from the start, and the founders tracked their progress with an eye to competitor cities. "We have many causes for mutual felicitation," the association's president, Alfred Vinton, announced in 1849, as "we take as many Reviews and Magazines as was [*sic*] received in 1847 by the Philadelphia Mercantile Library." He further boasted, "During the last year, more volumes were added to our library than to the Mercantile Library of New York, in either of the years 1840 or 1843."<sup>12</sup> Measured against the historical growth rates of comparable institutions, Vinton argued, the St. Louis Mercantile Library stood in good stead.

As confident as these business leaders appeared in their self-serving reports and minutes, their place as a center of influence in St. Louis was by no means assured at the outset. As board member Lafayette Wilson later related,



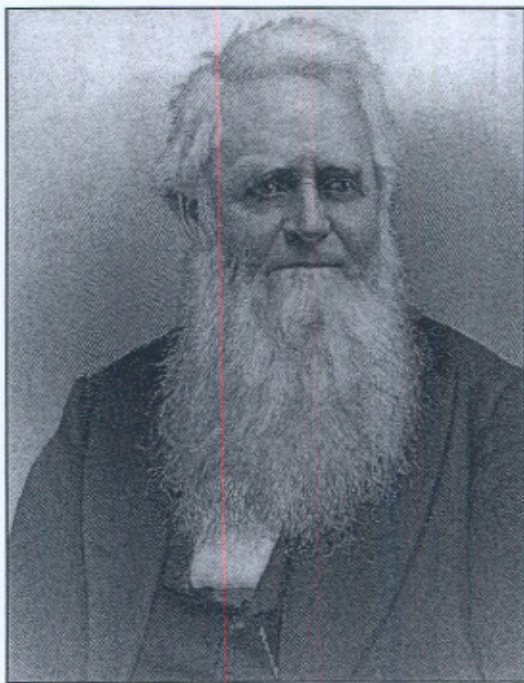
"Some of us well remember in the early existence of this association what a feeble institution it was; with a limited stock of books, your rooms small and unattractive."<sup>13</sup> With no building of its own, the Mercantile Library, like many others around the country, relied on members to donate space or to allow the institution to rent halls for a discount. Indeed, the effort to find a suitable venue for lectures was a recurring concern in the early minutes.<sup>14</sup>

The founders of the Mercantile Library were dedicated to their businesses but practically obsessed with how institution building could transform their community. To make St. Louis great, these men not only built up the trading and banking capabilities of the city and developed real estate, they also played key roles in establishing its social and cultural infrastructure. James Yeatman helped establish Bellefontaine Cemetery (1849), the Missouri School for the Blind (1851), and the Philharmonic Society (1860). He also served as a board member at Washington University, coordinated the efforts of the Western Sanitary Commission during the Civil War, and served as a founding board member for Lincoln University.<sup>15</sup> A similar record of charitable action could be listed for Hudson E. Bridge, a stove works manufacturer and railroad executive; Wayman Crow, a dry grocer; or Seth A. Ranlett, a merchant and banker, each of whom was an early member of the library, a founding board member of Washington University, and active in other organizations as well as in their Unitarian church, headed by the Reverend William Greenleaf Eliot Jr., who was also instrumental to the successes of many of these institutions.<sup>16</sup>

Content to serve on a board, manage finances, and hire competent administrators, these businessmen were quiet philanthropists who focused their efforts in business and left few records describing their community work. Their contributions made these institutions into civic landmarks, but recognition would only come later; in the 1850s, there was no promise of success. In line with Whig Party policy, these men sought to educate and acculturate their clerks and aid the poor and afflicted within St. Louis as part of an effort to secure civic recognition as well as financial success.<sup>17</sup>

The construction of a dedicated building for the Mercantile Library in 1854 marked the maturation of the earliest and most prominent of these efforts. The decision to build their own hall—choosing an elegant design and a prominent location and creating a successful financing plan—helped separate the Mercantile Library from earlier membership-library efforts like the St. Louis Lyceum and gave it a sense of permanence on the St. Louis landscape. The directors acquired a corporate charter and floated bonds to cover the expense, setting up canvassing committees to approach businessmen in all neighborhoods of the city, soliciting for new members and for members to purchase bonds. The funds were collected in a matter of months.<sup>18</sup>

In the meantime, the board had arranged for a design competition, accepting proposals from accomplished architects in St. Louis and beyond. They were



*Although a successful businessman who took part in many institutions, Hudson Erastus Bridge only held public office once, as a Unionist delegate to the state convention of 1861.*

[SHSMO 007161]





*Detail from John Cranch portrait of William Greenleaf Eliot Jr., one of the founders of Washington University. The school was named Eliot Seminary at its inception in his honor. [Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of the Descendants of Wm. Greenleaf Eliot]*

presented with an Italianate submission, a neoclassical look, and a Byzantine-inspired façade. "Your leading members labored on with a zeal and fidelity which has found its reward now in the establishment of Library Rooms and the erection of a Building," Wilson could say in 1865, "which is justly the pride not only of its membership and owners, but of an intelligent community." The final design featured two lecture halls, seating six hundred in the smaller and fifteen hundred in the larger; a reading room; librarian's offices; a directors' boardroom; bookshelves; and other small rooms over five floors, with rental property at street level.<sup>19</sup> Crafted at the size of the library's ambitions, the building at Fifth and Locust became a local landmark featured in St. Louis guidebooks.<sup>20</sup> Within easy walking distance of the entire central business district, the Mercantile building provided an essential "third place" for the synergy of business, education, and socializing for the commercial classes. Building construction crowned the efforts by which the library's members—whether

newly arrived or long established, already successful or merely striving—seamlessly merged into a coherent leadership community. The institution provided a setting for expression of St. Louis's and the nation's aspirations.

The Mercantile Library's founders donated many valuable paintings and books to the collection over the decades, but a handful stand out as symbolic of the historic importance the members sought for the collections.<sup>21</sup> Most notable was the manuscript fragment from Auguste Chouteau presented to the library in 1857 by former St. Louis mayor John F. Darby. The directors quickly had the text translated and set in type so it could be bound with the next annual report, cementing their attachment to this earliest and most direct account of the founding of the city.<sup>22</sup> The Chouteaus remained the city's most influential family, anchoring a network of French-speaking, fur-trading entrepreneurs that had first sparked St. Louis's success. Many documents of the presumably fading "Old West" were gathered at the Mercantile Library. Minutes record when John How lent the association "four oil paintings of Indian Chiefs" by Charles Deas and how Chester Harding's portrait of Governor William Clark came to the library when the city felt it might be damaged in the courthouse rotunda.<sup>23</sup>

The masterpieces of Missouri's first artist of national repute, George Caleb Bingham, also held pride of place in the nineteenth-century Mercantile Library. Bingham's paintings celebrated the growth of American institutions along the national frontier. The election series—*Stump Speaking*, *The County Election*, and *The Verdict of the People*—were visual encyclopedias of the new era of mass politics, pitting Jacksonian Democrats against the business-minded Whigs whom Bingham and his Mercantile Library patrons preferred.<sup>24</sup> The paintings, on loan to the library for much of the nineteenth century, were the highlights of many art exhibitions in the Library Hall.<sup>25</sup> Bingham's most fundamental nation-minded paintings remain in the Mercantile Library:



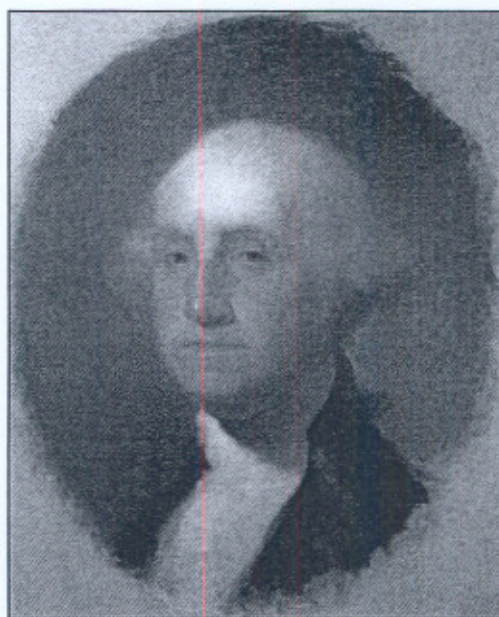
portraits of Martha and George Washington done as copies of Gilbert Stuart's works then hanging in the Boston Athenaeum. Bingham had used the paintings as reference works for a state commission; in 1859 he gave the excellent likenesses to the Mercantile Library—symbols of national unity at a politically difficult time.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the tumultuous 1850s, the Mercantile Library added icons of national political leadership: signatures of Washington, Daniel Webster, Aaron Burr, John Hancock, and Charles Carroll; statues and busts of Washington, Webster, and Clay; images of Mount Vernon.<sup>27</sup> Displaying the images of the nation's founders and possessing the earliest account of St. Louis's founding, the Mercantile's collections demonstrated its place of importance as a repository for the expanding nation.

Wonders and curiosities from near and far broadened the library's collections. Associates sent in specimens of Ozark marble from the newest quarries and continued to send unique minerals and fossils from new homes in the Far West.<sup>28</sup> Dwight W. Marsh, an American archaeologist working in Mosul, Iraq, offered Nineveh artifacts to the St. Louis Mercantile Library alongside Yale, Amherst, Williams, and Dartmouth colleges—giving an indication of the library's stature. The directors accepted. A statue and a cuneiform tablet were shipped to St. Louis, and Marsh soon came to lecture about his finds.<sup>29</sup> When the Civil War caused "the unavoidable suspension of our Book purchases," the librarian sought "such additions to our collection of Coins & Medals, as can be gratuitously [*sic*] made."<sup>30</sup> Ancient and modern, the valuable coins gave the library a global reach.

Historical sources have always been a particular interest of the Mercantile Library, not only to aid future scholars in research but also to distinguish the institution from merely social libraries. The library accepted a collection of French newspapers recounting the 1848 European revolutions from *Anzeiger des Westens* editor Heinrich Boernstein and welcomed personal collections of important national newspapers like the *National Intelligencer* and the *New York Times*—even when they arrived roughly, in "four Barrels deposited at the N. M. R. R. Depot at St Charles to be forwarded to St. Louis."<sup>31</sup> The librarian and his staff bought the best illustrated works when they could: John James Audubon's *Birds* and *Quadrupeds* folios and Gustave Dore's Bible illustrations were purchased soon after publication. When the library's German readership grew, the directors ordered a full set of "the works of the following standard German authors (some 47 vols. to cost some \$125) Kant Fichte Hegel Leibnitz [*sic*] & Schillings [*sic*]."<sup>32</sup> On another occasion, a librarian wrote to a London bookseller that he urgently needed "a work containing colored plates of fancy costumes and Tableau representations – I don't know how better to describe such a work than to say we want it for our lady patrons who ransack our library for some thing of the sort."<sup>33</sup>

The library urged its honorary members, St. Louis's representatives, to gather state and national laws and statutes and expedition and exposition reports.<sup>34</sup> In 1854, with a tinge of that year's anti-Catholic nativist



[From the collections of the St. Louis Mercantile Library at the University of Missouri-St. Louis]



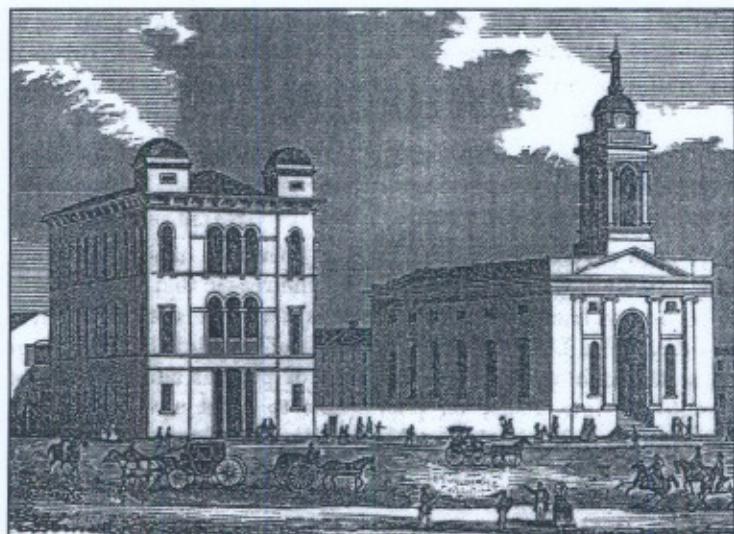
politics, librarian William P. Curtis requested the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution to send the Mercantile Library the region's complimentary copy of its publications, as the library of St. Louis University "does not reach the public."<sup>35</sup> The Smithsonian reports were received. Far more ambitious was the effort just after the Civil War to obtain a full run of the British patent reports. "Embracing 2680 Volumes, and 71,922 Specifications," the acquisition required an extensive transatlantic correspondence.<sup>36</sup> There is a sense of pleading evident in the letters from the librarian, John Napier Dyer, to Missouri Senator Charles D. Drake: "The State Library of New York and the Young Men's Library of Chicago have each been the recipient of a copy from British Government. And knowing the interest you have always taken in the success and prosperity of our Institution, and the value of such an acquisition to the Mechanical interest of our City, we make this appeal to you with full confidence that you will do all in your power to secure them for us." A year and an entire dedicated freight shipment later, the volumes arrived, and St. Louis could maintain its national claims alongside New York and Chicago.<sup>37</sup>

The breadth of the Mercantile Library's newspaper subscriptions gives a sense of the wide horizons members set for their political and commercial dealings. In April 1854 the list included the *Philadelphia North American*, *Washington National Intelligencer*, *Boston Daily Post*, *Cincinnati Gazette*, *Louisville Journal*, *San Francisco Alta Californian*, *London Daily Mail*, *London Times*, *New Orleans Picayune*, *Richmond Enquirer*, *Charleston Courier*, *Savannah Republican*, *Mobile Advertiser*, and *Baltimore American*, as well as the five local papers and other journals.<sup>38</sup> The first library subject classification system in the United States was developed at the library and promulgated through a number of catalogues of its holdings avidly read at the Library of Congress and other institutions.<sup>39</sup>

As much as for gleaning information about the books purchased and the artifacts gathered, the immense value of the Mercantile Library collections lies in reconstructing the everyday functioning of the library, the interactions with patrons, and the correspondence about book purchases and lectures.<sup>40</sup> Individual member records reveal patterns of use. For example, Susan Blow, an educational innovator and founder of the first American kindergarten once

sent a note to the librarian, asking, "I desire to give the use of our page at the Library to Mrs. Shaw Sr. and her family - Please give her the number of the page. I think it is in father's name (Henry T. Blow)." Blow offered privileges to another woman, perhaps a relative of Henry Shaw, the founder of the Missouri Botanical Garden, but did so in her father's name. This brief exchange hints at the means of—as well as the limits on—education and leisure for women in the nineteenth century. Extending library privileges was also a way to curry favor with political

Established in 1818, Saint Louis University is the oldest university west of the Mississippi River. The illustration shows the school circa 1859. [SHSMO 028535]





and military elite: William Tecumseh Sherman, living in St. Louis and serving as the nominal commanding general of the U.S. Army during Reconstruction, was among those writing in for lecture tickets. In 1872 federal Indian agent D. R. Risley was invited "to visit the Mercantile Library, with the Sioux Indians, during their Sojourn in the City"; the librarian was "confident they will see many objects here to admire."<sup>41</sup>

Both the successes and the failures of the library's lecture committee give further evidence of the scope of its ambition. From the outset, the committee was aware "its communications have involved replies from some of the most distinguished men of this age," including "letters from Clay, Webster, Benton, Bates, & others," men "whose names form part of the history of our Country." The committee chairman correctly predicted, "Some years hence it [the letter book] will be one of the most interesting Books the Library contains."<sup>42</sup> Though Henry Clay, Stephen Douglas, Fanny Kemble, Victor Hugo, William M. Thackeray, and Charles Dickens declined lecture invitations, their warm words for the Mercantile Library entered into the archives, phrased like the celebrity endorsements of the era.<sup>43</sup> East Coast lecture luminaries Louis Agassiz, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Yale scientist Benjamin Silliman were persuaded to come to the Mercantile Library, yet the directors found many of their lectures sparsely attended.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, the ambitious invitations did not stop. Requests were sent to Herman Melville, Alexander Stephens, Judah P. Benjamin, Henry Ward Beecher, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, among others.<sup>45</sup> After the Civil War, Susan B. Anthony and Harriet Beecher Stowe were among those who rented the Library Hall for their speaking tours. Yet not every national figure was welcome: the minutes note that "Mr Dyer was instructed to respectfully decline the proposal made him to rent the Hall to Frederick Douglass," reflecting the racial prejudices even at the height of Radical Reconstruction in St. Louis.<sup>46</sup>

As its local and national profile grew, the Mercantile Library became the key place for commemorating momentous events. Following the Great Fire, which burned the downtown district on May 17, 1849, the directors of the library mourned the deaths of two of their members, Thomas B. Targée and Wells Colton, and resolved to investigate the library's insurance coverage and "to ascertain what books, belonging to the association [and borrowed by members] were burned on the 17<sup>th</sup> Ultimo, and procure copies of those so destroyed as soon as practicable."<sup>47</sup> In 1851 the Pacific Railroad Committee of Arrangements—staffed with many Mercantile Library stalwarts—invited the library directors to join in their groundbreaking; in 1855 the directors recorded how "the whole community was paralyzed by the accident at the Gasconade bridge," a tragedy along the rail line to Jefferson City that killed dozens and injured hundreds of St. Louis's business and political elite.<sup>48</sup> When Joseph Charless Jr., a library member, lawyer, bank director, entrepreneur, and philanthropist, was shot and killed in the streets on June 3, 1859, after giving



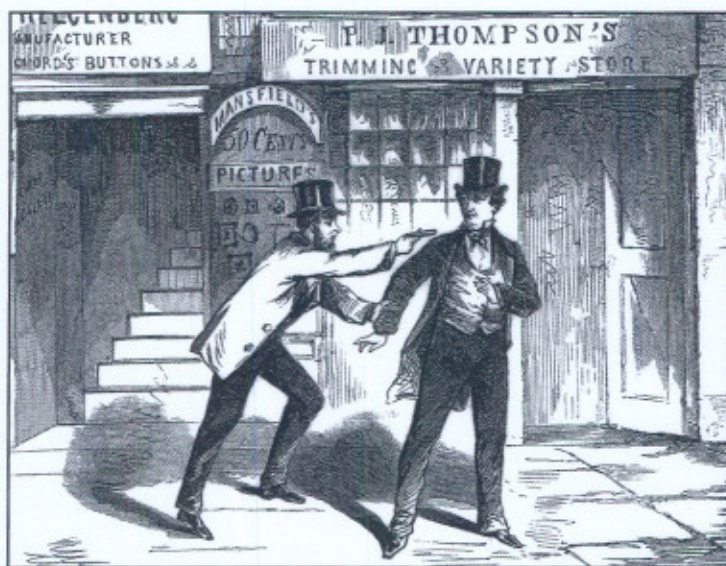
*Heinrich Boernstein was an ardent reformer and ideologue, using his paper, Anzeiger des Westens, to attack American nativism and organized religion.*  
[SHSMO 006920]



damning testimony in a fraud case, his friends "perpetuate[d] the Memory of one So distinguished" by having "his full size portrait to be painted" and presented to the Mercantile Library, where it still hangs today.<sup>49</sup>

The most profound event of the era was the Civil War, ripples of which are evident throughout the library's records. The Mercantile Library Hall was the largest indoor gathering space in St. Louis, and the directors as a whole were long opposed to the extension of slavery; thus, it was the perfect setting for those working to keep St. Louis and all of Missouri within the Union. The 1861-1863 state convention met in the hall and rejected secession; troops drilled there during the war; in 1865, Missouri's slaves were emancipated by a decree passed in the hall; and there the Drake Constitution was drafted and approved.<sup>50</sup> In 1862 the library members were happy to receive "the U. S. Flag which now waves over the Hall" as well as a staff to hold it, and Edward Everett spoke there on "The Origin and Character of the War" a year before serving as the keynote speaker at the Gettysburg commemoration (where Lincoln's brief remarks would forever leave his oratory in the shade).<sup>51</sup> The Ladies Union Aid Society came to the library for rental space, and the Mississippi

Valley Sanitary Fair asked for loan of "the curious and rare things from the Library" to attract interest from spectators.<sup>52</sup> Donated to the Mercantile Library afterward was "'a part of the Bulkhead for the Boilers, on the Gun Boat Essex' with Hole made by a 32# Ball from Fort Henry Tennessee" and "also the 32# Ball that did the damage."<sup>53</sup> Not everyone at the library supported a strident Unionism; the librarian at the start of the war, Edward William Johnston, brother of a Confederate general, resigned rather than sign a loyalty oath.<sup>54</sup> Due to "the unsettled state of the country," the board found the library suffered during the war, as "many of our



*Joseph Charless Jr. was shot by Joseph W. Thornton after helping convict Thornton of fraud. Charless died a day later, after forgiving Thornton for his crime. [SHSMO 028536]*

members have left the city" to serve in the U.S. Army, seek business prospects elsewhere, or because they held Southern sympathies and found St. Louis under martial law a difficult place to live. Despite these challenges, the directors still found an eager audience and declared, "We must esteem it as gratifying evidence of the hold our institution has upon the public regard."<sup>55</sup>

Events at the Mercantile Library embodied the shocking transformation from victory to grief that came at the end of the war. On April 13, 1865, James H. Rollins, a son of the founding "father" of the University of Missouri, sent a messenger to the librarian from his wartime post at the United States Arsenal: "My dear Friend, some days ago two mountain howitzers were sent up to your Hall for declaration on the occasion of the celebration of our recent Victories - They have not yet been returned & if you will be kind enough to point them out to the bearer & allow him to have them I shall be greatly obliged." Four days later, after Lincoln's assassination, the librarian telegraphed the actor



James Murdoch: "Can't you postpone our Readings one or two weeks on account of our country's sad bereavement? Answer."<sup>56</sup>

The conflicting strands of Reconstruction events were also reflected at the Mercantile Library, as Alexander Stephens, former vice president of the Confederacy, was again invited to speak at the library in 1866, less than eighteen months after Appomattox. As states began to change their constitutions during Reconstruction, the librarians worked to collect a full set of the new statutes; curiously, some states refused. As the retreat from Reconstruction gathered steam, Horace Greeley brought his Liberal Republican campaign to the Mercantile Library in the 1870s. Much as they had marked St. Louis's conflagration, the library directors also collected artifacts of the Great Fire of Chicago.<sup>57</sup> The Mercantile Library had fulfilled its founders' visions—grown from a mere repository of history to a place where history could be shaped.

The Mercantile Library's twenty-fifth anniversary celebration, held on January 13, 1871, demonstrated the institution's political hold on St. Louis. Many of the founders and former presidents, now eminent men retired from their successful businesses, served as the planning committee. Ministers, principals, judges, and doctors—any prominent leader in the directors' circles—were invited, along with that most prominent St. Louisan, President Ulysses S. Grant, who declined.<sup>58</sup> The *Missouri Republican* reported that the celebration, with its marches, speeches, and banquet, was truly a public affair, as "the Mercantile Library has become so prominent a feature in our city, and so identified with the social life of our citizens that almost everyone feels an interest in its progress, both on account of its benefits and value to the community in the aggregate, as well as the personal means for culture and literary enjoyment which it affords."<sup>59</sup>

James Yeatman broke from his traditional reticence and gave a speech recounting the library's origins, noting the increase from 283 members in the first year to 3,539 members at the anniversary, and from 720 books paged in 1846 to 105,375 requests in 1870. Despite having just renovated their building, Yeatman announced the directors' next bold proposal: that the "Library Association, Historical Society and Academy of Science . . . [erect] a fine and commodious building" inside the city's Missouri Park (at Olive and Twelfth, near the current location of the St. Louis Public Library) solely for cultural institutions.<sup>60</sup> Though the plan was not followed, the idea suggests the status the Mercantile Library had garnered by its quarter-century of existence, making requests of the city and working to enshrine its institutional standing. In the tumultuous years of Reconstruction, the librarian constantly offered "the freedom of the Library & Reading Room" to the delegates of visiting conventions—pharmacists, ministers, teachers, whoever was respectable.<sup>61</sup> In the years that followed, the library would retain its place as a vital resource in shaping the cultural and intellectual currents of St. Louis and the nation.

"Our valley becomes the highway of nations," the Mercantile Library's first librarian, Josiah Dent, declared

*A man of scrupulous honesty, James Yeatman was the inspiration for Winston Churchill's character Calvin Brinsmade in Churchill's 1901 novel, The Crisis. Churchill called Yeatman "the flower of American tradition."*  
[SHSMO 002843]





in 1853. "We . . . have the good fortune to be located at its grand focal, geographical and hydrographical centre, where art and nature . . . conspire for our aggrandizement."<sup>62</sup> Between 1846 and 1871, members of the Mercantile Library created a broad vision for St. Louis and made the library its premier cultural institution. Whether through the reports from the anniversary celebrations or the impact of Silas Bent's scientific "discovery," in the art collections, or on the shelves of historic books, the St. Louis Mercantile Library garnered national influence. Its directors, members, and librarians participated in the same patterns of intellectual engagement as their counterparts in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia and set forth patterns copied in Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and other cities seeking to shape and define the future of the nation. The power of the Mercantile Library's history—at once completely local and yet vital to national trends—is on display every day. The resources of the Mercantile Library's rich collections open a unique perspective on the histories of St. Louis, Missouri, and the nation.

## NOTES

1. President of the Mercantile Library Association [Richard M. Scruggs] to Carl Schurz, 11 April 1870, Letter Book 10: 335-336. All archival sources are in the St. Louis Mercantile Library Association Archives collection, M-117, unless otherwise noted. Silas Bent, *An Address . . . Upon the Thermometric Gateways to the Pole; Surface Currents of the Ocean and the Influence of the Latter Upon the Climates of the World* (St. Louis: R. P. Studley [for the St. Louis Mercantile Library], 1869). Bent's argument was neither correct nor original. For precedents with Alexander von Humboldt and throughout the science of polar exploration, see Aaron Sachs, *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism* (New York: Viking, 2006), 26.

2. The best account of Missouri's transformation to the date can be found in Norma Lois Peterson, *Freedom and Franchise: The Political Career of B. Gratz Brown* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1965), though it maintains the prejudices against Radical Reconstruction from an earlier era. For national trends, see Richard Allan Gerber, "The Liberal Republicans of 1872 in Historiographical Perspective," *Journal of American History* 62 (June 1975): 40-73.

3. Caroline Loughlin and Catherine Anderson, *Forest Park* (St. Louis: Junior League of St. Louis-University of Missouri Press, 1986), 7; Logan Uriah Reavis, *Saint Louis: The Future Great City of the World* (St. Louis: St. Louis County Court, 1870); John Napier

Dyer to Logan Uriah Reavis, 30 September 1869, Letter Book 10: 275.

4. Bradford Luckingham, "Agents of Culture in the Urban West: Merchants and Mercantile Libraries in Mid-Nineteenth Century St. Louis and San Francisco," *Journal of the West* 17 (1978): 28-35; Luckingham, "A Note on the Significance of the Merchant in the Development of St. Louis Society as Expressed in the Philosophy of the Mercantile Library Association, 1846-1854," *Missouri Historical Review* 57 (January 1963): 184-198; Clarence E. Miller, "St. Louis Mercantile Library: An Old Library and Its Civic Background," *Missouri Library Association Quarterly* 7 (June 1947): 23-31; Betty Boyd Walker, "The History of the Saint Louis Mercantile Library: Its Educational, Social and Cultural Contributions" (PhD diss., Saint Louis University, 1986); Clarence Miller, "Forty Years of Long Ago: Early Annals of the Mercantile Library Association and Its Public Hall, 1846-1886" (unpublished manuscript, St. Louis Mercantile Library, 1935). The role of the art collection is analyzed in Julie A. Dunn-Morton, "Art Patronage in St. Louis, 1840-1920: From Private Homes to a Public Museum" (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 2004). A vital guide to the richness of the collections and the library's early catalogues is John Neal Hoover, *Cultural Cornerstone, 1846-1998: The Earliest Catalogs of the St. Louis Mercantile Library and the Growth of the Collections for a Varied Community of Readers* ([St. Louis]: St. Louis Mercantile Library at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, 1998). No overall investigation of the library's history, significance, and impact has been written, though it could easily anchor a study of



the culture of St. Louis, as the Missouri Botanical Garden did in Eric Sandweiss, ed., *St. Louis in the Century of Henry Shaw: A View Beyond the Garden Wall* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003).

5. *An Inventory and Guide to the Archives of the St. Louis Mercantile Library Association* (St. Louis: St. Louis Mercantile Library Association, 1989). The cataloging of the collection exists in further detail on handwritten legal sheets in many of the archival boxes.

6. For some of these recent efforts, see Thomas Augst, *The Clerk's Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); John Buschman and Gloria J. Leckie, eds., *The Library as Place: History, Community, and Culture* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2007); Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

7. For a further discussion, see Adam Arenson, "Libraries in Public before the Age of Public Libraries: Interpreting the Furnishings and Design of Athenaeums and Other 'Social Libraries,' 1800-1860," in Buschman and Leckie, *Library as Place*, 41-60.

8. These are the themes of the author's larger work, Arenson, "City of Manifest Destiny: St. Louis and the Cultural Civil War, 1848-1877" (PhD diss., Yale University, expected 2008). For a consideration of the interplay of ideology and archives, see Antoniette Burton, *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

9. The first meeting was mentioned in the *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, January 13, 1846, pasted into Board of Direction Minutes (January 1846-September 1855) 1: 3, and reprinted in Miller, "Forty Years of Long Ago," 7-8. For a general discussion of the establishment of social libraries, see Carl Bode, *The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956); Augst, *Clerk's Tale*.

10. For a sense of this business community and their cultural efforts, see Joseph C. Thurman, "James H. Lucas: Eminent St. Louis Entrepreneur and Philanthropist," *Missouri Historical Review* 101 (April 2007): 129-145; James Neal Primm, "The Economy of Nineteenth-Century St. Louis," in Sandweiss, *St. Louis in the Century of Henry Shaw*,

103-135; Ralph E. Morrow, *Washington University in St. Louis: A History* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1996), 1-43; Jeffrey S. Adler, *Yankee Merchants and the Making of the Urban West: The Rise and Fall of Antebellum St. Louis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Mike Venso, "James E. Yeatman - St. Louis' Compassionate Philanthropist of the Civil War" (unpublished, 2004), provided by the author.

11. Board of Direction Minutes 1: 4, 5, 14; St. Louis Mercantile Library Association Constitution, sec. 1, art. 5, as cited in many early annual reports.

12. St. Louis Mercantile Library Association, *Third Annual Report of the Board of Directors of the Mercantile Library Association of St. Louis, Missouri* (St. Louis: Chambers and Knapp, 1849), 15, 20.

13. Lafayette Wilson, end-of-year report, Board of Direction Minutes (October 1855-January 1869) 2: n.p., meeting, 30 December 1865.

14. Board of Direction Minutes 1: 190. For a discussion of scrambling for space for the Rochester Mechanics' Association, see Adam Arenson, "Receiving and Perceiving Emerson: Examining 'the Conduct of Life' Lectures through Newspaper Reviews in Rochester and St. Louis, 1851-1860" (AB thesis, Harvard College, 2001), 20-40.

15. Lawrence O. Christensen et al., eds., *Dictionary of Missouri Biography* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), s.v. "James Erwin Yeatman"; Venso, "James E. Yeatman"; James E. Yeatman to the Directors of the St. Louis Mercantile Library Association, 6 April 1846, Letter Book 2: 11.

16. Christensen et al., *Dictionary of Missouri Biography*, s.v. "Hudson Erastus Bridge," "Wayman Crow," "William Greenleaf Eliot"; Morrow, *Washington University*, 103-104.

17. Adler, *Yankee Merchants*; Venso, "James E. Yeatman." See also Augst, *Clerk's Tale*; Allan Stanley Horlick, *Country Boys and Merchant Princes: The Social Control of Young Men in New York* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1975).

18. Board of Direction Minutes 1: 98, 19, 432; Mercantile Library Hall Company records, Record Group 2; Board of Direction Minutes 2: 96-99, n.p., meeting, 28 January 1868. For details about the financing and bonds, see Miller, "Forty Years of Long Ago," 31, 34. For a history of some of the



earlier St. Louis libraries, see Records of the St. Louis Lyceum, M-114, St. Louis Mercantile Library; Mechanics' Institute of St. Louis Records, Jefferson National Expansion Memorial Archives, St. Louis.

19. Architectural Drawings, Record Group 10; Proceedings of the Directors of the Mercantile Library Hall Company, 6 May 1851-20 January 1870; Wilson, end-of-year report, 1865; William Curtis to S. Colton, 29 December 1856, Letter Book 8: 117.

20. See John Hogan, *Thoughts About the City of St. Louis: Her Commerce and Manufactures, Railroads, &c.* (St. Louis: Missouri Republican Steam Press, 1854).

21. This follows the impressionistic path of an innovative article by Clarence Miller that begins, "Nine portraits hanging on the Library walls have come to epitomize for me the story of St. Louis and the West." Miller, "Exit Smiling [Part III: Reflections Culled from the Autobiography of Clarence Miller, Librarian of the Mercantile Library of St. Louis]," *Missouri Historical Society Bulletin* 6 (April 1950): 353.

22. Auguste Chouteau and St. Louis Mercantile Library Association, *Fragment of Col. Auguste Chouteau's Narrative of the Settlement of St. Louis* (St. Louis: G. Knapp, 1858); Board of Direction Minutes 2: 111, 122, meetings of 6 October 1857, 12 January 1858. For some doubts about the late appearance of narratives of colonial St. Louis, see Eric Sandweiss, *St. Louis: The Evolution of an American Urban Landscape* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 23-36.

23. Board of Direction Minutes 3: 8; letters between Henry W. Williams and Chester Harding, 8-9 January 1854, Letter Book 2: 215-215a, and in St. Louis Mercantile Library Association, *Eighth Annual Report of the Board of Directors of the Mercantile Library Association of St. Louis, Missouri* (St. Louis: Intelligencer Office, 1854), 16-18.

24. Jonathan Weinberg, "The Artist and the Politician: George Caleb Bingham," *Art in America* 88 (October 2000), accessed online; Scott Casper, "Politics, Art, and the Contradictions of a Market Culture: George Caleb Bingham's 'Stump Speaking,'" *American Art* 5 (Summer 1991): 26-48; Gail E. Husch, "George Caleb Bingham's the County Election: Whig Tribute to the Will of the People," *American Art Journal* 19 (1987): 4-22.

25. Board of Direction Minutes 2: n.p., meeting 1 April 1862; Dyer to Bingham, 21 July 1862, Letter

Book 9: 25. For the offer of the paintings to the Mercantile and their sale to the Polytechnic Institute and the How family, as well as a brief seizure by the sheriff, see Board of Direction Minutes 2: n.p., meetings of 2 August, 6 September 1864, 7 January, 15 October 1868, 5 January 1869; *ibid.* 3: 34-36; John F. How to Dyer, 13 June, 19, 22 September 1871, Letter Book 4(b): 325, 354, 355; Mortimer N. Burchard to How, *ibid.* 7: 57. For a discussion of the paintings' history in the Mercantile Library, see Dunn-Morton, "Art Patronage," 29.

26. Board of Direction Minutes 2: [195], n.p., meeting of 29 December 1859; Dunn-Morton, "Art Patronage," 26; Miller, "Forty Years of Long Ago," 55; St. Louis Mercantile Library Association, *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Board of Directors of the Mercantile Library Association of St. Louis, Missouri* (St. Louis: Missouri Democrat, 1860), 24-25.

27. Board of Direction Minutes 1: 347, 453, 465; *ibid.* 2: 165, n.p., meetings of 7 June, 29 December 1859, 7 March, 10 July, 31 December 1860; *ibid.* 3: 23, 34, 71; Willis S. Williams to Curtis, 8 November 1850, William Ives to Curtis, 23 November 1855, both in Letter Book 2: 74, 300; Alfred Carr to J. C. Taylor, 7 March [1860], Carr to J. H. Brown, 20 July 1860, both in *ibid.* 7: 10, 13; Dyer, memorandum on Barton Bates's donations, 22 September 1871, *ibid.* 10: 487. See also Dunn-Morton, "Art Patronage," 26.

28. Henry Cobb to William M. Morrison, 2 December 1856, Letter Book 2: 359; Thomas E. Tutt to Dyer, 14 July 1868, Letter Book 3: 31.

29. Dwight Marsh to Sir, 9 August 1855, Letter Book 2: 305; Curtis to John Wiley, 20 June 1857, *ibid.* 8: 128; Thomas A. M. Ward to Gentlemen, 24 July 1871, *ibid.* 4(b): 336; Charles Miller to Marsh, 19 March 1861, *ibid.* 7: 16; Board of Direction Minutes 2: n.p., meeting, 3 November 1863. Marsh's findings were also discussed by the Academy of Science of St. Louis. See Board of Direction Minutes of the Academy of Science in St. Louis (typescript), 43, meeting, 29 December 1856, Academy of Science of St. Louis archives.

30. Board of Direction Minutes 2: n.p., meeting, 7 September 1861. See also Charles Miller to various donors, 28 September 1861-February 1862, Letter Book 7: 18-24; Charles L. Thompson to various donors, 2 December 1862-11 March 1863, *ibid.*, 30-34.



31. Quote from George C. Sibley to Curtis, 20 January 1859, Letter Book 2: 2. Heinrich Boernstein to Curtis, 11 November 1853, *ibid.* 2: 210; Board of Direction Minutes 1: 361, 383; 2: n.p., meeting, 1 October 1867.

32. Quote from Board of Direction Minutes 2: n.p., meeting, 15 October 1868. *Ibid.* 2: 180, n.p., meeting, 4 August 1868; Curtis to Victor Audubon, 28 April 1855, Letter Book 8: 59; Dyer to Langhoeld & Halt, 2 August 1866, *ibid.* 9: 602; Dyer to Messrs. Gempefr & Castethem, 12 May 1871-19 June 1872, *ibid.* 10: 448-557.

33. Dyer to Michael Coomes, 20 March 1865, Letter Book 9: 400.

34. Henry Geyer to Sir, 14 February 1853, *ibid.* 2: 182; Erastus Wells to Sir, 11 January 1871, *ibid.* 4(b): 233; Dyer to Wells, 29 February 1872, *ibid.* 10: 523-524; Dyer to B. Gratz Brown, 6 May 1864, *ibid.* 9: 251; Dyer to Brown and Dyer to John Hogan, 22 March 1866, *ibid.* 9: 564; Dyer to Brown, 14 July 1866, *ibid.* 9: 598; Dyer to Charles Drake, 16 November 1867, *ibid.* 10: 82.

35. Curtis to Spencer Baird, 28 September 1854, *ibid.* 8: 46.

36. Dyer to B. Woodcroft, 11 February 1871, *ibid.* 4(b): 416-417. See Board of Direction Minutes 3: 18-19, and letters between Benjamin Moran, Dyer, and B. F. Stevens, 12 December 1870-29 December 1871, Letter Book 4(b): 263-413.

37. Dyer to Drake, 19 May 1870, Letter Book 4(b): 340-341. The patent reports remain in the collection, after having made a round trip from the Mercantile Library to the St. Louis Public Library and back to the Mercantile Library. Judy Friedrich, conversation with author, May 2006.

38. Board of Direction Minutes 1: 409, meeting, 3 April 1854. See also end-of-year report, *ibid.* 2: n.p., 31 December 1864.

39. For these catalogues, see Hoover, *Cultural Cornerstone*. For an order to produce them, see Alfred Vinton to Hudson E. Bridge, 18 January 1850, Letter Book 2: 47.

40. Adam Arenson, "Everyday Lessons in the St. Louis Mercantile Library, 1846-1871," *St. Louis Mercantile Library Fellowship Reports* (forthcoming).

41. Susan Blow to Dyer, n.d. [likely late February 1870], Letter Book 4(a): 33; William Tecumseh Sherman to Dyer, 19 January 1869, *ibid.*

3: 38; Dyer to D. R. Risley, 15 August 1872, *ibid.* 11: 9.

42. John T. Douglass, Board of Direction Minutes 1: 351. The Clay letters are unknown outside of this mention.

43. Board of Direction Minutes 1: 253-254, 435, 460; *ibid.* 2: n.p., meeting, 3 December 1867; Curtis to Floyd Clarkson, 11 December 1856, Letter Book 7: 114; Dyer to Joseph Sabin, 6 September 1867-8 January 1868, *ibid.* 10: 54, 75, 78, 83, 84, 89, 90, 92, 99.

44. Board of Direction Minutes 1: 96, 435; *ibid.* 2: 18, n.p., meetings of 29 December 1860, 26 December 1861.

45. *Ibid.* 2: 120, 141-142; *ibid.* 3: 59; Dyer to Henry Ward Beecher and others, 6, 31 July, 3 August 1869, 9 June 1870, Letter Book 10: 252, 255-256, 257, 349-350; Oliver Wendell Holmes to Sir, 23 July, 23 August 1865, *ibid.* 3: 14-15; Dyer to Holmes, 22 June 1870, *ibid.* 10: 353.

46. Susan B. Anthony to Sir, 9 November 1867, Letter Book 3: 25; Board of Direction Minutes 3: 70; *ibid.* 2: n.p., meeting, 1 August 1865.

47. Board of Direction Minutes 1: 109-111. The specific books lost are listed in Miller, "Forty Years of Long Ago," 17.

48. Thomas Allen et al., Committee of Arrangements, Pacific Railroad Office to [Hudson E. Bridge, President], St. Louis Mercantile Library Association, 27 June 1851, Letter Book 2: 101; lecture committee report, Board of Direction Minutes 2: n.p., meeting, 7 January 1856.

49. Board of Direction Minutes 2: n.p., meeting, 5 January 1860; Alfred Carr to Donors, 22 January 1860, Letter Book 7: 8; Christensen et al., *Dictionary of Missouri Biography*, s.v. "Joseph Charles, Jr."

50. Board of Direction Minutes 2: n.p., meetings of 5 March 1861, 14 August, 2 September 1862; C. W. Marsh to Librarian, 21 September 1862, Letter Book 3: 8; Dyer to Messrs. Drake, Budd & Lanton, 30 December 1864, *ibid.* 9: 347.

51. Quote from Charles L. Thompson to Albert Pearson, March 1862, Letter Book 7: 25. Thompson to Bridge, 5 March 1862, *ibid.* 7: 26; Board of Direction Minutes 2: n.p., meeting, 30 December 1862.

52. Quote from Board of Direction Minutes 2: n.p., meeting, 3 May 1864. See also *ibid.* 2: n.p., meetings of 5 May 1863, 8 March, 4 October 1864;



Dyer to Mrs. A. L. Clapp, Ladies Union Aid Society, 27, 29 September, 7, 9 November 1862, Letter Book 9: 51, 54, 68, 70; Charles Miller and Henry Senter to George Partridge and Carlos Greeley, Standing Committee of the Mississippi Valley Sanitary Fair, 4 March 1864, *ibid.* 9: 240.

53. Dyer, report to board, in Board of Direction Minutes 2: n.p., 5 August 1862.

54. Edward William Johnston folder, St. Louis Mercantile Library; Board of Direction Minutes 2: n.p., meeting, 4 February 1862; Thompson to Johnston, 5 February 1862, Letter Book 7: 24.

55. Report in Board of Direction Minutes 2: n.p., 23 December 1861. See also Dyer to John Lord, 19 October 1864, Letter Book 9: 324.

56. *Ibid.* 3: 9; Dyer to Murdoch, 17 April 1865, *ibid.* 9: 420.

57. Dyer to A. H. Stephens, 17, 18 August 1866, *ibid.* 9: 612, 619-620; correspondence between Dyer and state officials, 13 May-10 June 1871, *ibid.* 4(b): 295-324. Board of Direction Minutes 3: 17; Horace Greeley and associates to Dyer, February-June 1870, Letter Book 4(a): 60, 78, 131, 132, 168; 19 May 1872, *ibid.* 4(b): 409; Dyer to Greeley, February 1870-January 1871, *ibid.* 10: 305, 328, 329, 393; O. F. Woodford to Librarian, 19 November 1871, and Henry Folsom to Dyer, 8 December 1871, both in *ibid.* 4(b): 386, 393.

58. For anniversary planning, see S. A. Ranlett, Hudson E. Bridge, John T. Douglass, J. H. Alexander, J. H. Beach, R. A. Barnes, Robert

Barth, John C. Tevis, Lafayette Wilson, and Charles Miller to Scruggs, 17-29 September 1870, Letter Book 4(a): 118-129. For responses to invitations, see 23 December 1870-9 January 1871, *ibid.* 4(a): 173-232.

59. *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 14 January 1871, as quoted in Miller, "Forty Years of Long Ago," 97-98.

60. Quote from Yeatman's speech to the anniversary celebration, *ibid.* See also Board of Direction Minutes 3: 31, 32, 54; Dyer to Bridge, Yeatman, and John M. Krum, 7 June 1871, Letter Book 10: 454, 456, 458.

61. Dyer to E. D. Jones, 19 May 1865, Letter Book 9: 426; Dyer to William J. Mason, secretary of the convention, Trinity Church, 25 May 1870; Dyer to Noah Flood, moderator of Missouri Baptist General Association, 14 October 1870; Dyer to moderator of Southern Baptist Convention, 11 May 1871; Dyer to Rt. Rev. C. F. Robertson, 25 May 1871; Dyer to Supreme Council of the Temple of Honor & Temperance, 9 August 1871; Dyer to president of National Educational Convention, 22 August 1871; Dyer to Local Secretary, American Pharmaceutical Association, 12 September 1871; all in *ibid.* 10: 281, 344, 373, 447, 451, 469, 472, 483; Dyer to Chairman, National Commercial Convention, 11 December 1872, *ibid.* 11: 39.

62. Josiah Dent, *Lecture on the Mississippi Valley, Delivered before the St. Louis Mercantile Library Association on the 18th February, 1853* (St. Louis: Chambers & Knapp, 1853), 28.