The American Library in Paris
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An Account of Its Origin
Growth and Purposes

By Charles Louis Seeger
President, Board of Trustees, 1920-24

NEW YORK
1925
I. PURPOSES

At the entrance to the main reading rooms of the American Library in Paris one may read this brief statement of its origin and the two leading objects for which it was founded—one commemorative of the past and the other looking toward the future:

The American Library in Paris is the outgrowth of the War Library established by the American Library Association in 1917 for the use of American soldiers in the camps, trenches and hospitals.

The development of the institution as a representative American library has been undertaken in order to perpetuate the memory of those who gave their lives for humanity and to complete their task by creating, through knowledge of their respective literatures, a better and more sympathetic understanding between America and her Allies.

Only by the generosity of the American people can these objects be attained.

It was recognized at the outset and it has been proved during the few years of the Library's existence that it can be of especial service in the preservation of Franco-American relations which, though fundamentally cor-
dial, based as they are upon a historical friendship and a common love of individual liberty, are marred from time to time by rumor and hostile propaganda that is only to be counteracted by intercommunication of the real facts pertaining to the questions at issue. The exchange of current literature and documentary information, together with a more general knowledge of the past history and achievement of the two nations is bound to dispel misunderstandings that arise from ignorance of the motives which form public opinion in the respective countries.

It was not long before it became evident to those responsible for the development of the American Library in Paris that the same need for a better reciprocal knowledge between France and America existed to an even greater degree between America and other European countries. The very fact that a library, composed largely of books, periodicals and documents in the English language, must necessarily draw its material from English as well as American sources, insured cooperation from prominent Englishmen at the start, especially as the Library in its character as a memorial of the struggle in which the three great nations were associated could not but gain respect and sympathy for its efforts to maintain a spirit of fellowship between the former allies. And it was found that there was quite as much to be done in extending library service throughout Continental Europe, at least as far as concerned the collection, classification and dissemination of documents bearing upon current political and economic events.

The creation of new nations and the discussion and adjustment of post-war difficulties gave rise to a multitude of diverse opinions, too often based upon ignorance of the facts. In America, especially, was this the case, and the certainty that as time went on it would become more and more laborious to ascertain the truth indicated clearly the necessity of collecting at a central point the information by reference to which the course of events could be followed and intelligent opinion could be formed.

By virtue of its location in the intellectual, and actually the political, center of the world, the American Library in Paris appeared to be the logical depository and distributor of documentary information for the use of all who desire facts as distinguished from hearsay, polemics and propaganda. This work has accordingly been undertaken and is assigned to a special department of the Library—the Reference Service on International Affairs—which is described at greater length in the following pages. By means of opportune bulletins and through its affiliation with the American Library Association, whereby a close contact with the great libraries and universities of the United States is obtained, the Library possesses the means of disseminating information in a manner to educate American public opinion on European topics. The rapidly increasing interests of America in all parts of Europe and her apparent destiny as the international creditor call for the most reliable and comprehensive collection of documents that can possibly be assembled. No other organ-
ization exists at present with so effective a program for preserving and giving access to knowledge of this sort. The daily press, it is true, publishes in abridged form the texts of treaties, reports of conferences and government statistics; the reviews comment upon them and draw conclusions according to the views of the respective writers; government offices place them in their archives, but none of these agencies pretends to furnish the data which the seeker after facts needs at a given time. That service can only be performed by a library and it must be a library near the source of the information required, a library of international scope and devoted to the cause of international education.

It is in its capacity as a tool for the advancement of general international education that the American Library in Paris will fulfill its highest mission. Important as is the reference service dealing with current events, it constitutes only one branch of library activity. A better understanding between peoples demands more than present-day facts. A more intimate knowledge of the history, manners and aspirations of a nation, as reflected in its best literature, will throw light upon its actions and processes of thought, which would otherwise fail to be understood. If we take France and America, for example, we shall find that, with few exceptions, American literature is practically unknown in France, while French modern literature, through lack of selection, suffers from the undue prominence of what may be termed the "export" variety of cheap fiction. A guide for the flow of literature in either direction is sadly needed. French scholars and students have been quick to appreciate the advantage of finding on the shelves of the American Library books which they could only procure elsewhere with great difficulty, if at all, and at the same time the public libraries in America are being aided in their acquirement of the best European literature by lists that the individual librarian could not otherwise obtain.

International education being a fundamental requisite for any serious effort toward international peace, it follows that the international library by its mere existence and its daily service is unconsciously working toward that high end. In so far as the American Library in Paris shall help to diminish racial antagonism and national prejudices will it become a still more worthy memorial of those young Americans—and they were by no means few in number—who were inspired by the faith that they were fighting to make aggressive warfare less possible and military adventure less attractive in the years to come. They played their part gloriously and there is no more fitting way to pay them homage than to carry on a war against ignorance and prejudice with the same faith which inspired them and so to justify their sacrifice.

The foregoing brief outline of the fundamental purposes of the American Library in Paris is not the expression of a vague desire for a broader knowledge and a correspondingly greater sympathy, tolerance and understanding between the European and American peoples. Practical results are already being attained

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through intelligent and persistent effort and the experimental period may be said to have been passed. If it is to carry out its program, if it is to be typical of all that is best in modern library methods for the accomplishment of its special task, it must occupy adequate and permanent quarters, enlarge its book collections, acquire a sufficient and well-trained staff and cease to be hampered by lack of funds. Differing essentially from the usual public library in that its field of service is not limited to the locality in which it is situated but embraces two continents, it is obvious that only a small fraction of its annual outlay can be defrayed from local sources of income. It must, then, depend upon those who are in sympathy with its purposes for support on a scale commensurate with its high mission.

In closing a report prepared at the request of the American Committee, Mr. William W. Bishop, Librarian of the University of Michigan, wrote:

“The American Library in Paris has a distinct place. It has proven its right to live. It gives something nothing else supplies and it meets a very real demand. . . . The Library must be generously endowed. To close it would be to renounce a great opportunity for mutual understanding in intellectual lines and to remove a great agency for keeping alive real Americanism in Europe. It must go on.”

Entrance to Library
II. ORIGIN

If the material foundation of the American Library in Paris has yet to be laid, its spiritual foundation is one whose historical significance will always be a precious possession. Few institutions have ever borne so close and sacred a relationship to a world event as that which connects the Library with America's effort in the Great War.

In order to centralize the work in Europe of the War Library Service, instituted by the American Library Association under the direction of Dr. Herbert Putnam, Librarian of Congress, a library was established early in 1918 at No. 10 Rue de l'Elysée to serve as a distributing point for the books arriving from America for the use of our soldiers at the front and in the various camps and hospitals. A careful selection of some ten thousand volumes was shelved in Paris and reading rooms were opened for those who were on leave or quartered there. This pleasant resort met with immediate appreciation.

Word passed from man to man that here was to be found a real bit of America in France—a public library. On Sunday afternoons, especially, they crowded around the open fires to read, or moved quietly about among the bookshelves, hunting for favorite volumes. And at night, during the period of the air raids, when the city was shrouded in gloom and no gleam of light revealed the presence of a library on the Rue de l'Elysée, the soldiers thronged the reading rooms until the hour of closing.

After the signing of the armistice the library be-
came even more useful to the men during the long delay incident to demobilization, when homesickness and inaction succeeded the enthusiasm and excitement of the war days. They called for books which would help them in their future occupations in civil life, to teach them something about French history, to guide them to an appreciation of French literature and extend their knowledge of Paris beyond the boundaries of the grand boulevards and Montmartre.1

The atmosphere which pervades the Paris Library and is reminiscent of its historic origin has been eloquently described by the American Ambassador, Hon. Myron T. Herrick, in a letter to the Librarian, dated December 1, 1924:

It has been called to my attention that the American Committee of the American Library in Paris is about to inaugurate a campaign for funds in the United States. I earnestly hope that the appeal which is to be made in behalf of this institution will be generously met by our people, for, in my opinion, the American Library in Paris is worthy of encouragement and support, not alone by reason of its present and past usefulness as a center of wide international service, but because of the sentiment which surrounds its historic beginning.

On the occasion of the touching dedication ceremony in December, 1921, when The American Library in Paris placed on its walls a Memorial Tablet in honor of the first American Volunteers who enlisted in 1914, in speaking of our young men and what the American Library had meant to them in the tragic years of the war, I said:

"It was to this Library that these young American soldiers came when on leave from the front. It was for their benefit and solace that this collection of books was begun; by their presence here this has become a hallowed place.

"Through those eventful days there was building here within these walls—not with hands—an imperishable, invisible sanctuary. Its foundation was laid in laughter, in sorrow, perchance in tears, when they were here. We now come reverently to add a tithe to the structure in the form of this Tablet, this Roll of Honor. The Library is in itself a living memorial to all, whether they fought and died under the Tricolor or the Stars and Stripes, for it was so

That other generations might possess,
From shame and menace free in years to come,
A richer heritage of happiness,
They marched to that heroic martyrdom.

"The historic beginning of this Library seems to me to have so predetermined its useful future that Americans should not permit the want of funds to retard its progress."

III. ORGANIZATION

In the autumn of 1919 it became necessary for the American Library Association to bring its activities in France to a close and the question arose as to the disposition of the book collection at Paris, which had increased by that time to about 20,000 volumes. For some time previous the use of the Library had not been restricted to the soldiers and consequently the general public, particularly students and resident Americans, had had opportunity to become acquainted with its value. This resulted in the formation of a Committee on Permanent Organization, for the purpose of forming a society which should receive from the American Library Association the books and library equipment and become responsible for the future maintenance of the Library. The Committee raised an initial sum of 264,000 francs, incorporated the American Library in Paris, Inc., on May 20, 1920, under the laws of the State of Delaware and, on the 24th of August of that year the American Library Association executed a Deed of Gift, conveying to the American Library in Paris the entire collection of books, periodicals, papers and library equipment at No. 10 Rue de l’Elysee. In addition, the A. L. A. continued to defray the expenses of the Library until the end of 1920 and a part of the expenses during the first half of 1921, closing their generous assistance to the new organization with an endowment of $25,000, the interest thereof to be devoted to the salary, in whole or in part, of an American library assistant, trained in an American library school and approved by the Executive Board of the Association.

The Certificate of Incorporation of the American Library in Paris, Inc., defines the objects of the corporation as follows:

To establish and maintain in Paris and elsewhere a library or libraries of books, periodicals and papers in the English and other languages.

To carry on in connection with said library or libraries such other activities as may now or hereafter be deemed properly incidental to the work of a library corporation.

To aid in the international exchange of information about books, libraries and library methods.

To promote cordial relations between France and America through mutual association in library work.

Clause 4 of the Certificate of Incorporation provides that the Corporation is not for profit and will have no capital stock. The membership shall consist of the corporators and of such other persons as shall contribute to, or cooperate in, the work of the Corporation upon the terms and conditions provided in the Constitution or By-Laws.

Clause 7 exempts the private property of the members from liability for payment of corporate debts.

The Constitution of the American Library in Paris, Inc., defines four classes of membership:

(a) Patrons; being all persons who shall have contributed to the funds of the Corporation at least five thousand francs.

(b) Life Members; being all persons who shall have contributed to the funds of the Corporation two thousand francs.
(c) Annual Members; being all persons who shall have contributed to the funds of the Corporation an initial fee of one hundred francs and shall also pay an annual fee of one hundred francs.

(d) The American Library Association.

The Board of Trustees, numbering fifteen, five of whom are elected by the patrons, life members and donors, five by the annual members and five by the American Library Association, have power to decline admission to membership and to suspend or cancel membership for cause deemed sufficient by the said Board. They have the entire management of the business, affairs and property of the Corporation. Not less than nine must be American citizens.

The officers of the Corporation are a President, a Vice-President, a Treasurer, and a Librarian, who is also Secretary. They are elected annually by the Board of Trustees. Their respective duties and obligations are defined at length in the Constitution.

The Standing Committees are as follows:

Executive. Five members, including the President and Librarian.
Finance.
Law.
Book.
Ways and Means.
Advisory. Chosen from among the most distinguished French men of letters, statesmen and publicists.
American. With headquarters in the United States, empowered to solicit endowments, donations and additions to the list of Patrons and Life Members of the Library.

IV. GENERAL LIBRARY SERVICE

A correct appreciation of the variety and extent of the general service rendered by the Library can only be derived from the annual reports of the Librarian, printed in the Year Books. A brief description of the more important activities of the institution will, however, convey an idea of the gradual progress so far achieved.

During the first two years, attention was naturally concentrated upon the service to local readers. The use of the reading-rooms was extended to the public without restriction as to nationality and without charge. Students were given the privilege of borrowing books, also free of charge. Others than students were required to pay a nominal annual fee, which was gradually increased from ten francs for one book at a time to twenty-five francs, at which figure it still remains. It may be noted that the purchase price of the average American or English volume in Paris is about forty francs. The result is that the Library has never lacked book borrowers from the start and the annual circulation has approximated five times the total number of books in the collection. Nothing could be more desirable than this record from the point of view of the Library's educational value and a higher borrowing rate would debar many readers from the advantages they now enjoy, thus defeating one of the objects for which the Library was founded. But it is evident that the loan service cannot be expected to yield a net in-
come. Rather is it a severe tax upon the resources of the Library and the capacity of its insufficient staff.

The first impression upon the mind of a visitor to the Library is the extraordinary use which is made of the privileges which it affords—out of all proportion, in fact, to the space available. The reference and periodical rooms are crowded to overflowing and the loan desk is constantly surrounded by card holders exchanging their books. The contents of the Library, including even the reference volumes with few exceptions, are still kept on open shelves, to which the public has access. This is a notable feature in a country where libraries, owing to the predominance of books of great value and unique character, are conducted rather for the preservation than for the circulation and use of their contents. The point is being reached where the open shelf system will have to be restricted to certain classes of literature in most frequent demand, but meanwhile the novelty of easy access and selection has created a spirit of good will and gratitude towards the Library, especially on the part of students and writers unused to such privilege, and so has popularized it and given it the reputation of being a new departure in library methods in Europe.

The first variation from an exclusively local service was the circulation of books outside of Paris and then beyond the boundaries of France. The Librarian reported at the annual meeting of members in November, 1924, that about 2,000 volumes, or almost two per cent of the total circulation for the year, had been sent

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out of town. This mail service may be expected to increase rapidly, owing to the extension of library privileges to professors and students in all the French universities and to teachers in the lycées, as well as to scholars generally through the Service des Prêts d’Imprimés of the Bibliothèque Nationale.

In the second half of the year 1923 a material increase in the Library staff gave opportunity to devote all or part of the time of the more highly trained members to the important work of advising readers how to find books on special subjects, answering their questions and assisting them in reference and research work.

Equally important is the beginning made in the direction of furnishing libraries and universities in America with information concerning current European literature. Two library assistants are now employed in this work, which is confined at present to French books. This feature is capable of great development and should eventually constitute a distinct department of the Library, doing for European literature in America what is being done for American literature in Europe.
V. THE REFERENCE SERVICE ON INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

For this highly interesting and useful branch of library service, requiring as it does an expert knowledge of international relations in the fields of economics, finance, politics, and sociology, it was found necessary to establish a separate department with a special staff and suitable quarters in the Library building where the work could be done and the collections could be shelved apart from the general library premises. This was made possible by an initial gift of $5,000 from Mr. and Mrs. William Emerson of Cambridge, Mass., followed by an appropriation of $7,500 by the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial for this special purpose.

It was determined at the outset that the Reference Service should be "strictly unbiased, divorced from any political or commercial alliance or control, kept free from the slightest taint of propaganda and confined to the presentation of verifiable facts as distinguished from interpretations and predictions of any sort."

After a preliminary period devoted to the collecting of relevant material, under the direction of Mr. Robert E. Olds, a member of the Board of Trustees, the work of organization was entrusted to Mr. Denys P. Myers, corresponding secretary of the World Peace Foundation, who spent six months in Paris, from April to October, 1924. An advisory committee, with Mr. Olds as chairman, was formed for the purpose of discussing the bases of operation and, as the work proceeded, it developed quite naturally into four main divisions:

1. Building up as serviceable a library on international relations as the funds at disposal permitted. As it was the recognized ambition of the Service to base itself in the main on source-material, steps were taken to secure government publications. Correspondence with Foreign Offices, embassies and legations brought about good results and contacts were made with Ministries and other government offices, commissions and committees, whereby future publications would be furnished as issued. Subscriptions were placed for some of the most outstanding publications. At the end of the first six months a collection of about 3,000 pieces of serviceable reference material was on hand, including a few good secondary works. Systematic assembling of back material was left for a more prosperous future, but in certain instances complete files of important publications were secured at a minimum cost.

2. The publication of Bulletins, summarizing facts relating to certain subjects of timely interest gathered from original material, and indicating to the student the sources where more complete knowledge of those subjects could be obtained. During the first six months three 12-page octavo pamphlets were issued:

   No. 1—The Present Status of the Post-war Settlement.
   No. 2—The Present Status of the Armament Problem.
   No. 3—Summary of Source Material.

These were distributed gratuitously in the United States to universities, libraries, newspapers, magazines,
chambers of commerce, banks, and private persons. They were circulated as well in Great Britain, Canada, and Continental Europe to the extent of some 4,000 copies. Many letters appreciative of their value have been received.

3. Personal and written inquiries, the greater part of which are from students, journalists and institutions, in need of historical, political and documentary information. This activity is constantly increasing as the Reference Service becomes better known.

4. Assistance to the more important university and public libraries of the United States in procuring European official and semi-official documentation. It is particularly difficult for even the best equipped American libraries to keep in touch with the non-periodical official publications of the European governments. Because of its special facilities for keeping *au courant* of such material, the Reference Service is now furnishing it to ten of the principal American libraries, including those of Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and Chicago Universities and the New York and Boston Public Libraries. It is evident that the access without delay to important official documentation on current matters in Europe is of incalculable value to those who guide public opinion in America.

Mr. Myers was succeeded in October, 1924, by Mr. Walter Russell Batsell, the present Director of the Reference Service. Under his administration the work has rapidly expanded. A fourth Bulletin, on the subject of “External Governmental Indebtedness” has been issued and two others were in preparation (January, 1925). In the Bulletin last issued there are included statements of the external debts of sixty countries. In the course of the voluminous correspondence involved, a number of valuable connections have been formed for a continued supply in the future.

Since October 1st about 600 additions have been made to the collection and the bulk of the material has been classified and catalogued. Besides the circulation of bulletins, original documents are being furnished, upon request, for different institutions.

The results so far attained during the experimental period have been most encouraging and have surpassed expectations. In fact the rapid increase of the material and correspondence handled is now exceeding the physical possibility of the limited staff to keep up with. The very enthusiasm with which the Reference Service has been welcomed from all sides, while most gratifying and demonstrative of its great usefulness, shows how necessary it is to develop its resources to adequate proportions. Up to the present the staff has at no time exceeded three members—a director, secretary and library assistant. Without voluntary overwork on their part and an absorbing interest in the undertaking it would have been impossible to bring the efficiency of the service to the point which it has already reached. It is only fair to add that this same spirit of devotion to the causes for which the American Library in Paris was founded has been noticeable in all branches of its activities from the very beginning.
VI. FINANCES

At the close of the year 1924 the American Library in Paris, Inc., possessed, in addition to its book collections and library equipment, endowment and reserve funds amounting, in round figures, to 625,000 francs. These funds were invested in United States Liberty Bonds and French National Defense Bonds, the latter maturing in the current year of 1925.

The operation of the Library during the first five years of its existence has been measured by its resources rather than anything like a complete or satisfactory fulfilment of its mission. Time was needed for due consideration of the extent to which the Library should be developed and meanwhile the obvious duty of its administrators was to conduct its affairs with prudence and to avoid excessive commitments.

The experience gained during this initial period has enabled a fairly comprehensive vision of the degree of usefulness to which the Library must attain and the hour has now arrived for a reversal of the past policy, which means an increase of its resources to meet a fixed expenditure, instead of an expenditure measured by income. Eventually a permanent endowment fund of One Million Dollars will be needed to provide an income which, in addition to the operating receipts of the Library, will be adequate for the fixed expense of maintenance. A logical investment of a portion of such a fund would be in a building which would give ample space for the growth of the book collections as well as better accommodation for readers.

But, inasmuch as the establishment of a permanent endowment of so considerable magnitude requires time and, possibly, a further demonstration of the service of which the Library is capable under more favorable auspices, a temporary financing program for the calendar years 1925, 1926 and 1927 has been devised. The details are set forth in a memorandum issued by the Board of Trustees under date of May 1, 1925. The appropriations made by the Trustees of the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, referred to therein, amounting to $22,500 per annum for the three ensuing years, added to the estimated operating receipts of the Library, leave a balance of a little over $25,000 per annum to be obtained from other sources.

It is confidently hoped that this sum, which will raise the total annual income of the Library to something over $60,000, will be contributed by public-spirited Americans, who are interested in the promotion of international education and the effort of the American Library in Paris to serve that end by the methods briefly indicated in the preceding pages.

June 1, 1925.
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