Libraries at the World’s Columbian Exposition

One of the historical topics that always intrigued me is the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893. Even though I grew up in the Chicago area, it wasn’t until my undergraduate history coursework that I even heard of the Exposition. The fact that so few Chicagoans know of the Exposition alone made it interesting, but as I continued learning more, I discovered that the Exposition touched nearly every aspect of American life in some way. I eventually wrote my undergraduate thesis on the competing ideologies of the women who created the Woman’s Building.1

Since I graduated from Butler University in 2009, numerous works have been published regarding women’s involvement in the Exposition. One of these works was Right Here I See My Own Books: The Woman’s Building Library at the World’s Columbian Exposition, written by Sarah Wadsworth. Given the subject of my thesis and my obvious interest in libraries, this book has been on my short list of books to read. This assignment gave me the excuse I needed to finally read the work in full.

At first, I set out to create a project on only the Woman’s Building Library, as it was the first library that was dedicated to showcasing the literary works of women. However, I soon discovered that the Woman’s Building Library was only one of many libraries at the Exposition.2 Each library was created for a specific purpose and audience, and their unique characteristics demonstrate different facets of the library practices of the period.

While there is now exhaustive scholarship of the Woman’s Building library, other libraries deserve the same consideration. My project aims to illuminate the details of other libraries on the Exposition grounds, with special emphasis placed on the American Library Association’s (ALA) Model Library, which has largely escaped modern scholarship. In the same way that the Exposition functions as a microcosm of American culture in the Gilded Age, the ALA model library serves as an example of how public libraries functioned in the period. Given that the Exposition occurred in 1893, less than two decades after the founding of the ALA and during the height of the professionalization of librarianship, the Model Library is an important snapshot of the issues of the period.

As this project was completed as part of my graduate coursework, there were time constraints to be considered. For this reason, the pool of primary sources that were accessible was limited. Only those primary sources that are still on library shelves, available through online portals, or accessible through historical databases were included in the project. The innumerable sources that are available in archival collections throughout the United States and the world were not consulted. Consultation of these sources will undoubtedly provide a compelling foundation for the claims presented. However, many of those archival primary sources served as source material for the many

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1 My undergraduate thesis is available in full at Butler University’s Digital Commons, http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1041&context=ugtheses.
secondary sources consulted. Therefore, these sources are represented here, though it is through another author’s interpretive lens.

Despite my inability to access some archival sources personally, the Exposition has long been a popular focus for scholarship. To this end, there are numerous secondary sources on the topic available. Taken together, they form a body of work that is quite thorough in its attention to detail and spans a number of disciplines. Access to a strong body of work was certainly advantageous in the completion of this project.

In contrast, there is very little information on the history of the ALA. While the early days of the ALA are frequently referenced in scholarship, it is usually an ancillary topic, rather than the main subject for study. While I did find a few secondary sources on the topic, primary sources are much harder to come by. They tend to be housed in various archives throughout the country, and are rarely available online. This is because the foundational period of the ALA is not generally a popular area of scholarship. Materials also tend to be spread out through numerous collections on different subjects; for example, biographical collections on Melville Dewey contain nearly as much information as collections on the ALA itself.

By casting a wide net for source material, the project eventually evolved into a discussion of the formation of seven different libraries during the Exposition, with mentions of many others. The project consisted largely of piecing information from the various primary and secondary sources to create a complete picture of each individual library. Each library has its own dedicated page on the project website, and there are several other pages containing an introduction, backstory, and resource list.