John Shaw Billings:
From “Lazy John” to Library Pioneer
By Judi Terpening
The idea to write a children’s story about John Shaw Billings began with a request from a local elementary school teacher. She asked for books about famous people from our county. As the youth services coordinator at the Switzerland County Public Library, I often put together collections of books to loan to teachers on various subjects. This request had me stumped. My co-worker, the local historian, showed me a file drawer of folders, one of which contained information about Billings. We both agreed that the information was not in a format that would be easily accessible for elementary school students. The seed was planted.

A couple of months later, I registered for the History of Libraries graduate course at Indiana University Purdue University at Indianapolis. Now, I had a reason to do the project and a deadline. While doing research, I found several books about Billings, but none of them had been written specifically for children.

One of the challenges of the research is that there is not much information about Billings birthplace, Allenville (now Allensville), Switzerland County, Indiana. The only trace of Billings life is the place marker pictured in the inset. The post office, country store and homes of that era no longer exist.

My work with children has taught me that making history interesting is done by stressing the “story” part of it. I have attempted to bring to life the information I have discovered about Billings. It is my sincerest hope that I have told his story well.
John’s Story

The boys were scheming. Mr. Moore’s melons were ripe and just waiting to be picked. It was a hot summer day. Nothing sounded sweeter than a fresh, juicy melon. The idea was to sneak into Mr. Moore’s field and pick a melon, or maybe two, and carry them down to Laughery Creek. They would place the melons in a shady spot in a shallow area in the creek. The water would cool the melons while the boys took a refreshing dip in the creek. After swimming, the boys would break open the melons by striking them just right on a sharp rock.

The plan was made. The boys could almost taste the fruity sweetness of the melon and feel the coolness of the water on their faces. What they needed now was a lookout. Mr. Moore was not happy the last time the boys invaded his field. He chased after them with a willow switch in his hand. They needed someone who could warn them if he happened to come by. John would be a great lookout. He was a quiet boy and kept to himself for the most part, but surely he would see the beauty of their plan and help them achieve it.

The boys found John sitting under an oak tree outside his father’s country store reading a book—*The Pathfinder* by James Fenimore Cooper. It seemed to the boys that he was always reading. The boys told him their ingenious plan, but John was not the least bit interested. Yes, it was hot. Yes, the melon would be tasty. But John had a book to read and nothing else mattered to him at the moment.

Disappointed and disgusted, the boys began to taunt him. They called him names. He became known as “Lazy John” to the kids in Allenville, Indi-
John’s Story

John was anything but lazy. He worked at his father’s store, even learning how to mend shoes, one of the services his father offered. And while it is true that he didn’t care much for farming, he did his share of planting seed corn, weeding carrots, and riding horses for horse-raking the hay crop. But what John really loved to do was read.

By the time he was eight years old, he had read the Bible verse by verse, all of Cooper’s work, and Pilgrim’s Progress. Reading was important to John’s family as well. Books were as valuable as furniture. When John had read all of the family treasures, he saved up each month to pay the one dollar subscription to borrow books from the local lending library.

It is in one of his readings that John came across some Latin verses that he didn’t understand. He asked a local clergyman, John C. Bonham to teach him Latin. Rev. Bonham agreed to help and soon discovered that John had a marvelous memory. He could recite long lessons in Latin and Greek. John taught himself everything else. School was only open three months out of the year, but on his own, he was able to learn enough Greek, geometry and other subjects to meet the requirements for admission to Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. He was fourteen years old when he left for college.

At college, John’s desire to read did not wane. He convinced his classmates to let him check out their limits from the college library. These books were in addition to his regular studies. The library was only open a few hours each Saturday morning. This fact did not stop John from obtaining books to read. When the library was closed, John would break in through an attic trap door and read to his heart’s content.
John’s Story

While living on campus, John learned how to cook simple meals. One of his favorite recipes was for papered eggs. He would take a very thick half piece of paper and pin the edges together like a bag to make a sort of pan. Six eggs were broken in a dish and the paper put on the cook stove. Then, the eggs were poured into the paper pan before the paper began to scorch. The trick was to stir the eggs from the bottom. In that way, there would always be liquid so the paper would not burn. When they were done, John would eat the eggs right out of the paper and throw it away afterwards. No dishes to clean!

John graduated second in his class at the university. He worked for a year tutoring and helping a man with a lantern slideshow. He saved up money to go to medical school.

As in college, John excelled in medical school, but he was not with-

Here is a modern day recipe with the same clean up as John’s papered eggs. Be sure to ask an adult for help.

Eggs in a Bag

Put a pot of water on medium heat on the stovetop. Crack 3 to 6 eggs in a boilable bag.* Twist the top closed with a bread tie. Holding the tied end, carefully break up the eggs by shaking the bag. Open the bag and add any ingredients that you wish such as cooked bacon or sausage, tomatoes, onion, cheese, etc. Close the bag again and place it in the boiling water with the top of the bag upright. It usually takes several minutes to cook. When the eggs look done (light and fluffy), carefully remove the bag from the pot. Tongs or oven mitts can be used to remove the bag. Open the bag and eat with a fork. Just like John’s eggs...no dishes to clean!

*Be sure to use food grade, boilable bags for available at camping suppliers. Typical zipper storage/freezer bags are not meant for boiling.
John’s Story

out some hardships. Many times he lived off eggs and milk only. His budget was often as low as 75 cents a week. (Today, that would be around $20). He didn’t let his hardships affect his studies. While he was working on his thesis,* John realized that finding medical information was extremely difficult. There were no indexes or catalogs of medical books, pamphlets or articles. This experience inspired him to develop the Index Medicus and catalog for the Surgeon General’s** office after the Civil War.

After medical school, John interned at St. John’s Hospital and Commercial Hospital both in Cincinnati, Ohio. He worked tirelessly and earned the respect of both hospital staffs. He worked at the hospitals for only two years. The Civil War had begun so in 1861, John asked for a commission as a medical officer for the Union Army. He spent six days being questioned by the board before he was finally accepted as a surgeon. John later found out that the reason for the delay was that the members of the board did not believe anyone from Indiana could be that good.

John became an expert field surgeon. The battles were often very bloody and had many wounded. Many times, he was in charge of the hospitals which were in bad condition. He ordered proper ventilation and drainage to be installed. He worked very hard and at times became ill.

It was at a time when he needed a rest that John received orders for a special assignment. In February 1864, he boarded the Marcia C. Day at Bedloe’s Island in the New York harbor. He inspected the ship’s hold which was empty except for medical supplies. He did not know the details for the assignment because some of the orders had been sealed. The first orders directed him to sail to a location east of the coast of Florida. There he opened the first set of sealed orders which sent him to an area between Cuba and Haiti. The final order was to land at Ile ‘a Vache in Haiti. It was not until then that he knew what his assignment entailed. It was his responsibility to

*A thesis is a long essay on a particular subject usually written by someone who is working towards an advanced college degree. John wrote his thesis about the surgical treatment of epilepsy.

** The Surgeon General is a doctor who works for the government and is in charge of public health. John worked in the Surgeon General’s office from 1865 to 1896.
African Americans in the United States and the growing concern that freed slaves would compete with whites for jobs. The President and corporate backers paid Bernard Kock a large sum, fifty dollars per person, to take care of the colonists. He was to supply them with houses, gardens, schools, churches, food, medical care and employment. Instead, Kock did not keep any of his promises. Many of the colonists became sick and died. Many were starving. The President sent the order to return the colonists to the United States. It was John’s job to give them medical care and bring them back to Virginia.

After the Civil War, John went to work at the Surgeon General’s office. It was during his 31 year career that John developed and implemented the medical library catalog. When John became the first librarian of the medical library in 1865, there were about 1800 items. Fifteen years later, he supervised the addition of about 50,000 books and 60,000 pamphlets, all of which John and his staff catalogued as the *Index-Catalogue*.

Obtaining more books and developing the catalog weren’t John’s only accomplishments while he worked at the Surgeon General’s office. He and his co-worker developed the *Index Medicus*. The comprehensive list was

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**John’s Story**

The voyage of the Marcia C. Day. Access map and description of locations [here.]

examine and return home the 397 African Americans who had been left there.

Two years prior, President Lincoln had signed an order to have freed slaves taken to various places, including Haiti, to begin a colony. The plan was an attempt to reduce the number of
John’s Story

published from 1879 to 2004. It is now available online through PubMed. Because of his work with in the Surgeon General’s office, he was invited by the trustees to suggest a design for John Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. John is credited with the design chosen for the building.

In 1880, he was assigned handling the mortality statistics for the United States census. Mortality statistics include the number of people who have died and their cause of death. It was during this work that he suggested to Herman Hollerith, who also worked at the Census Office, that a mechanical device to count the census would be very helpful. Hollerith designed a punch card system which some say was the first computer. The operator would use a stylus to punch the cards somewhat like a secret code. The holes in the cards represented different information such as age or race. The cards were then placed in the tabulating machine. Electrical connections made by wires going through the holes in the cards were recorded. This information counted the marks for various categories. It was many years later, in 1936, when libraries began using punch cards for analysis and book purchases.

John’s final contribution to library work was in 1896 when he became the first director of the New York Public Library in New York City. The library was a culmination of three libraries brought together as one and established in one building which John helped design. As director, he again was in charge of organizing the catalog and melding the holdings of each library into one collection. It was as a result of his request that Andrew Carnegie funded $5,200,000 to build branch libraries throughout New York. During his 17 years as direc-

Hollerith’s Pantographic card punch and punch card. Photo from Wikimedia Commons.
John’s Story

John (1838-1913) and Katharine Stevens (1836-1912) married September 3, 1862

Mary Clare (born November 9, 1863)
Kate Sherman (born October 23, 1866)
Jessie Ingram (born October 23, 1866)
John Sedgwick (born July 31, 1869)
Margaret Janeway (born November 4, 1872)

John was a doctor, a rescuer, an architect, an inventor, an innovator, and, indeed, a library pioneer.

John had a rich family life as well. He married Katharine Mary Stevens in 1862. They had four daughters, including one set of twins, and one son. Much of what we know of his experiences in the Civil War are from letters to his wife. She died in August 1912. John died seven months later from post-operative pneumonia in 1913. He was 74 years old.

John never returned to Indiana, and he was never again called “Lazy John.” He was many things, a husband, a father, a doctor, a rescuer, an architect, an inventor, an innovator, and, indeed, a library pioneer.
Story Behind the Story

Books


Articles and Original Source Material


Digital Public Library of America http://dp.la/


“John S. Billings is a Product of Switzerland County.” Vevay Reveille. 28 Mar. 1901. Microfilm.

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