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DEFINING AMERICANA
The Evolution of the John Carter Brown Library
The emergence of a rare book library as a research centre had its origins in a reaction to the growth of the tax-supported free public library. For about 500 years, roughly 1450 to 1950, the printed book embodied all that was essential in recording, communicating and preserving the activities of human beings. For some 450 of these 500 years this object stood as an icon for the rational, informed and educated man; the creation of a private library of books became the badge of a superior person. Its contents were regarded as valuable property — to be treated as such.

In the US the idea that groups of books should be formed for a particular reading public took hold around churches and colleges at the end of the seventeenth century. By the end of the first third of the eighteenth century this had broadened to the shareholding, circulating, subscription libraries beginning in 1731 with Benjamin Franklin’s Library Company of Philadelphia and followed by the Redwood Library in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1747, the Charleston Society Library in 1748, the Providence Library Company in 1753 and the New York Society Library in 1754. Well into the nineteenth century private subscription libraries were being founded throughout the US. Although these institutions are sometimes referred to as ‘public libraries’, their use could be restricted by the proprietors. The objects in these libraries were regarded with the same concern for their preservation and well-being as those in the private libraries of John Adams, Peter Force, Thomas Aspinwall, George Brinley, James Lenox, Henry C. Murphy, James Carson Brevoort, Samuel Latham Mitchell Barlow and John Carter Brown.

From the middle of the nineteenth century a number of factors began to disturb assumptions about the library as a safe haven for books. Among them were the growth of literacy, the development of the power press, mechanical typesetting and the manufacture of cheap paper that did not depend on rags. The result was a rapid increase in the production of books and demand for them. By mid-century the idea of a tax-supported library dedicated to the free circulation of books began to emerge. By the century’s end the free public libraries had
grown, absorbing many subscription libraries on the way. Along with this there grew the profession of librarianship with the founding of the American Library Association in 1876 and of the first library school, by Melvil Dewey, in 1887. The primary thrust of librarianship had become use or circulation; the physical object, the book, became something to be sacrificed in the pursuit of increasing circulation figures for annual reports. Sixty years ago I remember a trustee of the Free Library of Philadelphia, John B. Gest, pointing the changes of attitude toward the book since he was a boy. In his day when it rained he tucked his library book under his jacket. Nowadays the young put the book over their heads as an umbrella.

John Carter Brown, who had been forming his renowned collection of Americana since the 1830s, early recognized the threat to the well-being of books in public libraries and made it clear that his books should never end up in such an institution. When he died in 1874, aged 76, his widow fully appreciated his concern and early on introduced his sons, John Nicholas Brown and Harold Brown, to the collection by giving them as their tutor John Russell Bartlett, author and compiler of the groundbreaking catalogue Bibliotheca Americana: a catalogue of books relating to North and South America in the library of John Carter Brown of Providence, R.I. (1865–71). Thus John Nicholas Brown grew up with a full appreciation of his father’s achievement and even participated in the editing of the second edition of the catalogue. He also became an avid collector in his own right, expanding the collection in a number of different directions. The ownership of the collection, however, remained in the hands of his mother until his marriage in his late thirties, at which time he drew up a will that laid down how his library was to be disposed of: any institution that took it must contract that the John Carter Brown Library be distinct and independent of any other library associated with that institution. His reasons for insisting on this arrangement must, in part, have been influenced by what had happened in New York to the collection of John Carter Brown’s principal rival, James Lenox. At Lenox’s death in 1890 it was established as a private library, in its own building, available for research by qualified scholars. Within a few years its endowment was inadequate to sustain it.

The same became true of the Astor Library, which had earlier been established as a private research library. Although privately owned, these two constituted the major research libraries of the city but they did not circulate books. The will of Samuel J. Tilden, who died in 1886, provided about $2.4m to establish and maintain a free library and reading room in the city of New York. John Bigelow, a trustee of the estate, saw this as an opportunity to create a New York Public Library, partly in response to the handsome McKim, Mead and White Boston Public Library that opened in 1877. Thus came into existence ‘The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations’ and its building on Fifth Avenue. The city entered into the scheme by undertaking the circulation of books and supporting the branch libraries.

All this activity appalled another New Yorker, General Rush C. Hawkins, who began collecting incunabula in 1855. In 1860 he married John Nicholas Brown’s cousin Annmary Brown. At one time he and his wife planned to erect a memorial to Gutenberg in New York. The disappearance of the Lenox and Astor libraries into the New York Public Library put him off and the Annmary Brown Memorial was erected in Providence.

By the 1890s John Nicholas Brown realized that the special library room added by his mother to the family mansion on Benefit Street had become inadequate and he began planning for a separate building behind the house facing on Power Street. He also realized that he could no longer deal with the library’s affairs as he had since Bartlett’s death in 1886. The time had come to have a full-time librarian and he turned to the Librarian of the Harvard College Library, Justin Winsor, who had frequently cited the ‘Carter Brown Collection’ in his Narrative and Critical History of America (1884–89). Winsor in turn recommended a young history graduate student, George Parker Winship, a student of Edward Channing, to whom Winship had made clear that he had no intention of getting a PhD; Channing insisted that instead Winship do a thesis that amounted to a doctoral dissertation – published as The Coronado Expedition, 1540–1542 (1904). When Winship accepted the position in 1895, he made it clear that he did so in order to further his career as an historian. Between that date and 1900 he functioned as the family librarian, also planning for the separate building.

On 29 January 1898, the day after his mother conveyed the library to him, John Nicholas Brown signed his own will, in which he declared ‘my wish that this library or collection of books shall be considered a memorial to my father ... and shall preserve its individual identity as a whole’. His trustees should choose ‘some college, university or other institution’ for the library, which should have an endowment of $500,000 and a building fund of $150,000. A year and four months after
signing the will John Nicholas Brown died at the age of thirty-nine. Ten days later his brother Harold, who had been named as a trustee, also died, and 'The Harold Brown Collection of Books on the History of the Church in America' was included in the library. Although a number of institutions made enquiries after John Nicholas Brown's death, the two surviving trustees, George W.R. Matteson and Robert H.I. Goddard, signed an indenture with Brown University. The library thus came to Brown University through a contractual arrangement, not as a bequest. In a letter to Henry Stevens, the London bookseller, Winship says, 'I think we shall succeed in securing a virtually independent management – although it may be necessary to allow it directly with the University and call it part of the University although not of the University Library.' The building, which was to have been directly behind the Brown house on Benefit Street, was built three blocks away on the Brown campus in order to connect it to the university heating system, thus eliminating the need for a furnace.

Winship was appointed Librarian under the new arrangement on 9 January 1904 and the library building was opened on 17 May. While he had before him an exemplar of how to attack the problem of turning a private collection to public purposes in Wilberforce Eames, the great American bibliographer and the Librarian of the Lenox Library now at the New York Public Library, Winship faced a somewhat different situation. John Nicholas Brown had specified that the library be named for his father. Although John Carter Brown had begun by collecting books printed by Aldus Manutius, he soon abandoned them to concentrate on the Americana later memorialized by John Russell Bartlett's catalogues. John Nicholas Brown, influenced by his mother, began to drift away by buying illuminated manuscripts and incunabula. They even tried to buy a Gutenberg Bible. Winship put a stop to this expansion by establishing that it was the policy of the library to collect only books relating to the Americas printed before 1801. He decided that archival manuscripts were not to be a part of the library.

Satisfied with a vague notion of what constituted Americana, Winship went about continuing to strengthen the collection. Earlier he had persuaded John Nicholas Brown to buy Nicholas León's major collection of early Mexican books. He expanded the concept of Americana by increasing John Nicholas Brown's interest in cosmography and geography. He also extended the library's activities into the West Indies, the Scots Darien tracts and Quaker books. He became aware of the fact that John Carter Brown had paid little attention to the eighteenth century, the century in which he was born. Such material could be had at that time for fairly modest prices, and Winship arranged to buy American Revolutionary tracts printed in Great Britain from Henry Stevens of London, who had built up a substantial stock of them. He also made book-buying trips to Mexico, Cuba and Europe. During his twenty years as librarian Winship increased the size of the library by one-third.

He was aware of the need to make books available while protecting them from over-use. To this end in 1912 the John Carter Brown became the first library to install a Photostat machine. (The New York Public Library installed theirs a few months later.) Among other things Winship produced Photostat copies of a complete run of the Newport Mercury. He joined the Massachusetts Historical Society in issuing a series of Photostat facsimiles of important items in the two collections. He also planned and began a card catalogue of the library that was so elaborate and complicated that it would have been a candidate for a computer. He regularly mounted exhibitions and frequently organized receptions for local people.

In line with his intention to use the library to further his own career, Winship participated in the activities of the American Antiquarian Society and the American Historical Association. In the case of the latter he was a member of the Nucleus Club, an informal group of leading professors of history who tried to control the affairs of the association through elaborate private dinners. Winship was in charge of arranging the dinners. As his prominence increased his advice was sought by other collectors. William L. Clements of Bay City, Michigan, accompanied by the New York bookseller Lathrop C. Harper, came to visit in 1912. The latter was to become an important figure in the library's growth. Clements was in the process of forming a collection of Americana modelled on the John Carter Brown's. Winship became one of his principal advisers, particularly in the 1920s when he was in the process of building a library on the University of Michigan campus for his collection, which in the deed of gift and the building itself had many echoes of the John Carter Brown. Then in the summer of 1923, after it was opened without a librarian, Winship found a candidate for that position in my father, Randolph G. Adams, who was given the title of Custodian (a title later changed to Director).

Winship had always been a Harvard man at heart and had kept in
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touch with the library developments there – the most exciting of which was the building of the Widener Library with a special room to house the collection of Harry Widener who had been lost in the Titanic. In 1914 he accepted the job of Librarian of the Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library. The John Carter Brown Library then went through a difficult time. Champlin Burrage, the son of an influential alumnus, was Librarian of Mansfield College in Oxford. With a war starting in Europe his family wanted to bring him home and he was made Librarian of the John Carter Brown. But he was not a success and resigned two years later. During this time some of Winship’s policies were abandoned, such as his card catalogue and the purchase of American Revolutionary tracts. The Committee of Management made arrangements to have Worthington C. Ford come down from Boston once a week to advise the staff. It was under him that a new edition of a printed catalogue was begun. This arrangement continued until 1923 when the Committee of Management appointed the Assistant Librarian of the Enoch Pratt Library in Baltimore, Lawrence C. Wroth, as Librarian.

Wroth was a somewhat unconventional librarian in that he, like Winship, had no library degree, nor did he have a PhD. Indeed he was primarily an antiquary who had begun his career at the Diocesan Library of Baltimore and had written extensively on historical topics, but he had just published his masterful A History of Printing in Colonial Maryland, 1686–1776. He opened his first Annual Report with this statement: ‘As the private library of John Carter Brown and of John Nicholas Brown, its purpose was the collection of material relating to the three Americas, printed before 1801. Today our main concern is to carry out this policy as effectively as possible under conditions of supply which year by year become more stringent.’ To this end Wroth cultivated the interest and loyalty of such booksellers as Charles Goodspeed in Boston, Lathrop C. Harper in New York, A.S.W. Rosenbach in Philadelphia and the Stevens firm in London. His problem was that the cost of salaries and the administration of the building had doubled since the library had opened, while the value of the endowment had begun to decline. Aware as he was of the extraordinary strengths of the collection, he also recognized the unknown frontiers of the concept ‘material relating to the three Americas printed before 1801’. A dominant member of the Committee of Management had said that the library ‘was perfect and complete as it stood, and not a penny was ever thereafter to be spent on the purchase of a book’. Wroth no doubt did his best to evade these instructions but was stymied. This all changed when, in his own words,

One day in the late months of 1924 Mr. John Nicholas Brown [only child of John Nicholas Brown who had died in 1900], then a young man of some twenty-four years engaged in graduate studies at Harvard, came into the library to pay his first visit in my time as librarian. He displayed more than casual interest in all our concerns, large and small, and as he was about to leave he said he would be glad to help in the purchase of books. I said that was wonderful for only that day we had been offered four Italian and French tracts, three of them unique, displaying the unfriendly attitude of continental Europe towards Francis Drake. ‘I think we should buy them,’ he said.

This was soon followed by the purchase of Robert Cushman’s A Sermon Preached at Plimmoth in New England December 9, 1621 … together with a preface shewing the state of the country and condition of the savages (London, 1622), the earliest New England sermon, together with the first account of the trials of the colonists in that first year. The full extent of John Nicholas Brown junior’s gifts to the library is recorded in Libros Virumque Cano Gaudeamus (1970), published on the occasion of his 70th birthday.

From the beginning Winship had published an Annual Report, a thin pamphlet in blue wrappers in which he reported on the finances of the library, important purchases, gifts, activities such as meetings and the state of the building. Between 1901 and 1915 they averaged about 10 pages. What happened to them with Wroth’s arrival is best described by Edmund S. Morgan in his introduction to the collection Annual Reports 1901–1966 (1972):

But it was Lawrence Wroth, Librarian from 1923 to 1957, who transformed the Reports into a literary genre and a literary delight … Writing easily and gracefully, he hid his massive scholarship behind a deceptively simple, conversational style. Anyone who opens his Reports to look up a particular book will probably find himself trapped into reading about a great many other books.

Choosing a group of new acquisitions Wroth described their importance and the intellectual setting they found in the library. In the
process he gave a new or additional meaning to their importance. Over time the Annual Report grew into an 80-page booklet in the same blue wrappers. The preparation of the report could take up as much as one-third of the Librarian’s time. It deserved that much attention because, as Wroth said, his primary responsibility was to strengthen the collection and this was his way of reporting on how he was carrying out that responsibility.

Perhaps the most notable characteristic of Wroth’s acquisitions and his literary development of them were the many topics that he could extract from the concept of ‘Books Relating to the Americas printed before 1801’. He recognized that it encompassed maritime history, as expressed in his little book The Way of a Ship (1937). He had a special interest in the Spanish Southwest, that area of the US that once belonged to Spain. Among other things he bought a lot of books from the collection formed by Henry R. Wagner who had compiled the bibliography of the subject. A.S.W. Rosenbach let Wroth spend the payments over a number of years (Wroth referred to this period as ‘My Twenty Years in the Red’). In his last year he rounded out this area with the purchase of Relação Verida de os Trabalhos que o Governador Don Fernando de Souto (1557), the earliest account of the exploration of what is now the south-eastern United States by Hernando de Soto. In 1930 he had acquired La Relación que dio Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca de lo pasado en las Indias en la Armada donde y va por governador Pamphilo de Narvaez (1542), in which Cabeza de Vaca recounts his trip from what is now Pensacola to the Gulf of California, the earliest account of what is now the southwestern United States.

Another area in which Lawrence Wroth did pioneer work was the history of cartography. He vigorously bought early maps, which resulted in part in his The Early Cartography of the Pacific (1944). Perhaps his most notable work was the continuation of his interest in the history of printing in Maryland that culminated in his The Colonial Printer (1931). Although the library had shown an interest in pictorial material as early as 1916, Wroth made a quantum jump into the field in 1951–52 when he purchased from the R.T. Haines Halsey collection 285 caricatures and cartoons of American interest, many reflecting the American Revolution. Altogether after his arrival at the library, Wroth published over 200 pieces on bibliography and history. The development of the endowment did not keep up with his appetite for book buying, while the expenses of operating the library continued to grow. In 1944 this was somewhat alleviated when a friend of John Nicholas Brown’s, Wilmarth S. Lewis, helped to found the Associates of the John Carter Brown Library and was its first chairman.

One of the activities of the staff following the departure of Champlin Burrage was the preparation of a third edition of the printed catalogue. It was a bibliographically sophisticated piece of work, continuing the tradition of its predecessor compiled by John Russell Bartlett. Printed by a member of the Committee of Management, Daniel Berkeley Updike, this chronological record through the year 1658 was completed between 1919 and 1923 (a card inventory listing the books by author, brief title and date of publication was at the same time maintained). Wroth completed the volume for 1659 to 1674 in 1931. Although this effort to make the contents of the library more widely known through its printed catalogues came to an end for the time being, the catalogue later played an important role in forming the National Union Catalog at the Library of Congress.

While the 1909 Annual Report said that the library was ‘committed to the service of scholarship’ it depended upon word of mouth and deliberate publication to bring its remarkable riches to the attention of scholars doing advanced research. It was assumed that any scholar concerned with the library’s fields of interest would automatically become aware of its riches. Despite this Wroth kept a careful record of the number of research visits to the library. By the end of his first ten years that number had jumped from 170 to 710 annually. After that it remained at the 700–plus level until his retirement. This meant an average of six visits a day during the twenty-four years covered. These were dealt with by a staff that consisted of himself, two assistants, a photographer and part-time assistants for the Associates. In his last Annual Report Wroth took particular pride in 780 visits because he was aware of outside rumblings about the under-utilization of the library. The record of prominent scholars who found their way to the library begins with Gilbert Chirnside, a young instructor in French in 1909–12. It was the French books about America in the library that stimulated his important work on Franco-American relations beginning with his L’Exotisme américane dans la littérature française au XVle siècle (Paris, 1911).

The impact that Lawrence Wroth had on the library was considerable: while vastly enriching the depth and quality of the collection, through the Annual Report and his other writings (most of which were based on the collections of the library) he also made that depth
and quality known to most of the leading historians and book collectors of the country. This is well illustrated by the list of members of the Associates printed at the end of his last Annual Report. In his final year as Librarian the total membership was 867; almost half came from twenty-five states outside Rhode Island and from four foreign countries. Among them are the names of some of the most eminent book collectors and bookmen and -women in the US. Indeed the Associates of the John Carter Brown Library could well have been called the Friends of Lawrence Wroth. His stature was such that both the Pierpont Morgan Library and the Rare Book Department of the Library of Congress retained him as a consultant during difficult periods of transition.

At the end of Wroth’s thirty-four distinguished years as Librarian, there were two areas, however, that needed attention. On the technical level there was no card catalogue. The author-title file was essentially an inventory with minimal information about the book itself. There was also no call number system. A book was located simply by the bookcase it was in and the shelf it was on. There was no kind of subject approach to the extraordinary breadth and depth of the library. One saving grace was a chronological file listing books by the date of their publication. But the catalogue was not only a handicap for anyone wanting to use the library; it was also awkward when it came to researching dealers' quotes and catalogues for new purchases. Further, there was the question of Wroth’s treatment of the concept of Americana. While he fully recognized that the library's scope included both North and South America, a substantial part of his Annual Report each year was devoted to the history of what is now the United States.

In 1937, the year I succeeded Wroth, there was no job description for the position, nor was I given any instructions as to what my responsibilities were. These, I am sure, were the conditions under which Wroth arrived. As a matter of fact in 1923 when my father, Randolph G. Adams, newly appointed to the William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan, visited Wroth, who had just taken over the John Carter Brown, he described the meeting as follows: ‘I explained to him that I had just accepted a job about which I knew absolutely nothing. He summoned me into his sanctum and shut the door and grinned. “So have I,” he said. ‘My qualifications were simply that I had spent eleven years working in rare book collections, seven of which I had been in charge of the collection at the University of Pennsylvania and two years at the Chapin Library at Williams College. My exposure
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to Americana consisted almost entirely of what had rubbed off on me while growing up in the shadow of the William L. Clements Library. When I arrived in Providence the endowment had shrunk to the point that the library was almost entirely financially dependent on Brown University for its operation. The money raised through the Associates was used for the acquisition of rare books. The reference collection of the library was minimal and I inherited Wroth’s staff of three and a half people. The question of raising money to achieve the original financial independence was not mentioned.

The one thing that I felt the library needed most was a proper card catalogue. This was in part because of my background in rare books. The current standards of rare book cataloguing, as opposed to ordinary library cataloguing, had their beginnings in William McCarthy, who was brought from the University of Texas by William A. Jackson to head the cataloguing department in the newly opened Houghton Library at Harvard. McCarthy took the existing library cataloguing rules and refined them so as to bring out the salient features that made a book rare. Jackson made it a practice to appoint, as an apprentice, a young man as his personal assistant for a two-year term. The first person to hold that post was John E. Alden, who had found his way into rare books through my father while he was at Library School at the University of Michigan. When his two years were up he was transferred to the Cataloguing Department and William McCarthy. There he was trained in the McCarthy standards of cataloguing which he carried with him when he was put in charge of the Rare Book Collection at the University of Pennsylvania Library when it opened in 1947. A year or so later Alden hired me as his assistant and introduced me to the McCarthy method, which I subsequently taught the cataloguers I hired at the John Carter Brown. The quality of their work was confirmed when George Schwengmann Jr., the head of the National Union Catalog in the Library of Congress, told me that he used the cards we sent him for his record and discarded previous cards. My plan was to begin the cataloguing where the last volume of the printed catalogue left off, using the chronological file. So in 1973 we were able, using the cards, to publish a volume of the catalogue for the years 1675 to 1700.

Another thing that struck me soon after I arrived was the fact that the concept of Americana as practised by the John Carter Brown Library, vague though it was, had only incidental relation to the academic meaning of American history. History departments had Professors of
American History and Professors of Latin American History that were things apart. The former were primarily concerned with the history of what happened in what is now the United States. Most other history of the Americas omitted the term America and we had Mexican history, Canadian history, West Indian history, Chilean history etc etc. Then there were the two controls that had guided the growth of the collection since John Carter Brown started it: the printed book and the time restriction of the year 1800. Although these two elements were always present by implication, they were made official by Winship in 1904 when he took over. He was particularly opposed to archival manuscripts. The result was that, although most of the books in the library contained material about the Americas, the books themselves were written by Europeans, addressed to Europeans and printed in Europe. Another category of Americana, overlapping with this and other interpretations of the term, were books printed in America. Some of these were about American subjects but many of them were not. This was particularly true of the large number of New England sermons.

As I came to know the library it seemed to me that these two aspects of the collecting policy needed modification. The first thing I was able to deal with was the terminal date of 1800. It was quite obvious that in essence we were a library devoted to the Colonial Period of American history. Thus, by substituting the concept of the Colonial Period (1492–1830), it became possible to carry our collecting through to the end of European control of the New World. We still adhere to 1800 for North America but go well beyond it in other areas. The policy statement, 'The Present Scope of Acquisitions, John Carter Brown Library [by area and terminal dates]' of February 2001 has twenty-one categories with terminal dates as late as 1867.

My father introduced me to the ambiguities of the term Americana when I was quite young. Soon after he went to the William L. Clements Library in 1923 Junius Beal, a Regent of the University of Michigan, member of the Committee of Management and a close personal friend of Clements, wanted to give the library a 1480 edition of Cicero’s Tusculanae Disputations. My father demurred, saying that it really wasn’t Americana. Beal replied, ‘Young man, make it Americana. That is what you are paid for.’ A passage on Atlantis solved the problem.

Although there were bibliographical efforts to identify Americana as early as the seventeenth century the ones that played a major role date from the nineteenth century. The most prominent was Joseph Sabin’s

Bibliotheca Americana: a dictionary of books relating to America, from its discovery to the present time, in 29 volumes, published between 1868 and 1936. Sabin was a New York bookseller. His definition of Americana was broad – so broad that he apologizes for including New England religious works. During one of the periods when work was suspended George Parker Winship had suggested that it was not worth continuing partly because of its alphabetical arrangement. Since history is primarily a chronological story the alphabetical listing was awkward to use. Further, because of the length of time it took to complete the work much newly identified material in the early part of the alphabet was not present. For instance the definitive work, by Wilberforce Eames, on the proper sequence and number of editions of the Columbus Letter did not appear until 1924. The other bibliographies important in the growth of the library are arranged chronologically. They are Charles Evans’s American Bibliography; a chronological dictionary of all books, pamphlets and periodical publications printed in the United States of America from the genesis of printing in 1639 down to and including the year 1820. Actually the fourteen volumes published between 1903 and 1939 carry the work through 1800. The work to 1820 has been done by others. The counterpart to Sabin and Evans for Latin America are the many bibliographies by José Toribio Medina.

The John Carter Brown Library had been among pioneers in using the camera. The Photostat series with the Massachusetts Historical Society and the Newport Mercury were among our earliest work of that kind. The next development in this area was microfilm, which reduced the images to 35mm film. Perhaps the most successful figure in this stage was Eugene Power of Ann Arbor, Michigan, who founded University Microfilms. Among his projects was to film all the books in STC.

Albert Boni of New York, a publisher, saw in the success of University Microfilms an opportunity. First, however, he developed an alternative to microfilm, which had the unfortunate disadvantage of being easily damaged through scratching and deteriorating over time. Boni’s process, the Readex Microcard, in which a chemically inert cardboard was printed with the micro image, took up less space and was easier to use until it was succeeded in turn by microfiche. Boni approached the American Antiquarian Society with the proposal to microprint all the works in Charles Evans’s American Bibliography. This he was able to do and he sold sets of the cards to more than 188 college, university and
other research libraries in the US. The American Antiquarian Society used the Microcard to protect their originals by giving it to readers unless the original was essential.

For many uninitiated, the terms Evans and Sabin are like Castor and Pollux, different on the inside but the same on the outside. It was on this assumption that Albert Boni approached the John Carter Brown Library with the idea of repeating his success with Evans moving on to Sabin. I was able to convince him that the state of Sabin was such that it would be impossible to use it as a base from which to issue a microform image series. Instead it would be necessary to do a revision of Sabin chronologically arranged. To my surprise Boni agreed to do this and thus European Americana was born. He began by funding an arrangement of Sabin numbers by the date of publication of the item. At just about this time John Alden was getting ready to retire as Keeper of Rare Books at the Boston Public Library and he agreed to be the editor. After some growing pains, including moving the terminal date from 1776 back to 1750, the first volume came out in 1980. Alden retired after the publication of the second volume in 1982, and the work was continued by Dennis Landis, who finished with the sixth volume in 1997. With it and the imprint bibliographies already mentioned it can be said that there is now a reliable and effective guide to the contemporary printed literature about the Americas through the first half of the eighteenth century.

Cataloguing the library itself took a new and important turn. In 1976 I became involved in the planning for the Eighteenth Century Short Title Catalogue of books printed in Great Britain or in English in the rest of the world. The project included representatives from the major libraries of the Anglo-American world. What was immediately apparent was that the computer would be an essential part of the process. Further, at just about the same time the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules 2 (AARC2) were jointly issued by the Library of Congress and the British Library, laying down the basic outline of how library cataloguing would be done in the age of the computer. The details of how it would apply to different kinds of library materials was to be left to institutions concerned, most importantly in the US the Library of Congress. I felt that rare books should get to the head of the line when this process began. Together with Rodney Armstrong of the Boston Athenaeum we established the Athenaeum Group, made up of rare book cataloguers from the leading rare book institutions of New England such as Harvard, Yale and the American Antiquarian Society. Together we hammered out what we wanted under AARC2. The result was that when the Library of Congress put the development of the details for rare book cataloguing at the top of the agenda the Library of Congress task force came to Providence to meet with the Athenaeum Group. Soon after that the John Carter Brown Library plunged into computerized cataloguing.

Our bibliographical work paralleled a development in the historical world that began soon after I arrived. I date it from the publication in 1961 of Edmund O’Gorman’s The Invention of America: an inquiry into the historical nature of the New World and the meaning of history. In a brief book he outlined how the European world converted America from a geographical to an intellectual concept. O’Gorman had taught at Brown in the 1940s and became familiar with the John Carter Brown Library. His work was followed by Sir John Elliot’s The Old World and the New 1492–1650 in 1970. At the time he delivered those lectures Elliot was not aware of the John Carter Brown Library, but he has since played an important part in recent developments. These two scholars were basically Spanish historians. The next one to address the subject was an historian of colonial British America, Jack Greene, whose Intellectual Construction of America: exceptionalism and identity from 1492 to 1800, appeared in 1993. This was followed by Felipe Fernández-Armesto’s The Americas: a hemispheric history (2003) and Bernard Bailyn’s Atlantic History: concepts and contours (2005). Both Greene and Fernández-Armesto have been John Carter Brown Fellows. All these were small books introducing various aspects of the concept we represent. Only Sir John Elliot has expanded his thoughts with his Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830 (2006). It concentrates on the idea of the Atlantic as providing a unifying approach that would embrace our strength in maritime history.

One thing that I allowed to lapse soon after I arrived was the publication of the Annual Report. To produce anything like what Lawrence Wroth had done took too much of my time. In addition to administering the library I had other interests, including my work on the political pamphlets of the American Revolution. A great deal of effort went into our exhibitions, almost all of which resulted in a mimeographed catalogue, some in a formally published catalogue, notably The Italians and the Creation of America (1980) conceived and executed by the li-
library’s Bibliographer, Samuel Hough. From Providence the exhibition travelled to Florence in Italy and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC.

My arrival at the library in 1957 came at just about the time when scholarship and universities were undergoing profound changes. Before the Second World War, and certainly back to the First World War and before, the academic world of professors in the humanities was comparatively small. The demand for PhDs was not great. With the GI Bill, later followed by Sputnik, everything changed. State normal schools, agricultural and women’s colleges turned themselves into universities, creating a demand for PhDs for their faculties. People who before could not have afforded it were going to college and on to graduate school in increasing numbers; the faculty body became very different. At the beginning of the 20th century an academic career was assumed to be a gentlemanly profession, one in which it was a distinct advantage to have an independent income. Henry Adams when he was a Professor at Harvard took no salary. When faculty had to deal with the new doctrine of ‘publish or perish’, this meant going to research centres such as libraries, for which students needed grants. Should the libraries themselves provide assistance? The reaction to this of Thomas W. Streeter, who formed a great collection of Americana and had been Chairman of the Associates of the John Carter Brown Library, was: ‘We collectors go to great lengths and great expense to form the collections of rare books and manuscripts for scholarship. Do we have to bribe people to use them?’ A classic case was that of the Huntington Library. When Henry Huntington moved his great collection from New York to San Marino, California, and opened his library there in the 1920s, he had removed his books from the concentration of scholars in the East and Upper Midwest who were thus days away by automobile or railroad from a major research library. To remedy that, the Huntington Library set up a fellowship programme. Other libraries followed.

Soon after I arrived C. Waller Barrett, a collector of American literature and another Chairman of the Associates, gave us a large sum of money to start a fellowship programme. When it was spent I did not attempt to raise additional funds – partly because, on the few occasions when I tried to raise money from a foundation, I was asked what John Nicholas Brown had done for us. Early on I found in our archives a 1930s letter from him saying that because of financial setbacks he could no longer provide financial support for the library.

Universities had suddenly to become money-raisers. The Ford Foundation established a series of very substantial challenge grants that matched dollar for dollar money raised by an institution. Brown University was not on the original list, but the President, Barnaby Keeney, soon remedied that. Professional fund-raisers arrived, Development Offices opened, there was increased pressure on the alumni. Brown University had big ambitions. At the outset there were faculty salaries. President Keeney told me when I first arrived that with their low salaries faculty members were subsidizing a Brown education. The medical school was expanded, departments added new fields to their curriculum, two new libraries were built. Fund-raising became a major preoccupation.

At first, during the first Ford Challenge Grant, the John Carter Brown Library received its share in proportion to the money we raised through the Associates and other gifts. However, except for the Associates’ funds, which went to build the collections, the finances of the John Carter Brown Library came almost entirely from the budget of Brown University. Now the basement was finished to provide space for more book stacks, an improved photographic laboratory, and a map room; the whole building was air-conditioned; the staff of four and a half people was enlarged, to include a trained cataloguer and a curator of maps—all at the university’s expense. The thought of any aggressive money-raising for the John Carter Brown Library during the student unrest of the 1960s and 1970s was discouraged. Indeed John Nicholas Brown told me that the wisest thing would be to keep a low profile. The William L. Clements Library at Michigan was actually invaded by students, while Arthur Houghton arranged for bulletproof glass to be put in the Houghton Library at Harvard. At the John Carter Brown Library I had the most valuable books removed to safety.

During these years, in addition to administering the library, I was at work on my bibliographies of American Revolutionary pamphlets for which I received two sabbaticals to go to England, the first with a Guggenheim Fellowship and the second with a NEH fellowship. The collections continued to grow under the initiatives described above. With the arrival of Howard Swearer as President in 1977 the university became pressed for money and his cry was for budget relief. With the approval of John Nicholas Brown we responded by selling a group of illuminated manuscripts collected by his parents which were outside our scope of collecting. In the meantime I was approaching my
twenty-fifth year in office and President Swearer suggested that the
time might have come for an evaluation of the state of the John Carter
Brown Library. I completely agreed and an outside committee was
formed chaired by Douglas Bryant, the Director Emeritus of the
Harvard Libraries, and including John Elliott, then at the Institute of
Advanced Studies at Princeton, and Charles Watts, former Dean of the
College at Brown and former President of Bucknell University. The
resulting report was a strong one and embodied suggestions for the
future that clearly required new leadership.

In 1983 Norman Fiering became the Director and Librarian. Unlike
Lawrence Wroth and myself, he was a trained historian who had pub-
lished two distinguished books on American moral and intellectual
history. He brought with him from the Institute of American History
and Culture a broad knowledge of the academic world but also an
understanding of the needs of an organization devoted to advanced
scholarship. Over the next twenty-three years he focused on the major
problems and opportunities with which he was faced: the lapsed fel-
lowship programme, too small a building, publications, scholarly con-
ferences, the impact of electronics and the endowment. The Fellowship
programme expanded dramatically; over 580 scholars from senior fig-
tures to graduate students working on dissertations have come to the
John Carter Brown Library, and he acquired a residence for the Fellows.
His most visually prominent achievement was the Caspersen addition
to the building; this almost doubled the size of the library. Among the
conferences that have been held was one on the completion of European
Americana, another on maritime history. The catalogue had already
joined the electronic age through integration with the catalogue of the
Brown University Library. Fiering took it a step further by involving
the library in digitization of texts. However, his most spectacular
achievement is the endowment. Today the John Carter Brown Library
is clearly a hub on its own bottom. Indeed we pay Brown University to
manage our financial affairs.

Besides all this Fiering continued to strengthen the collections.
Perhaps the most notable area in which he worked is Luso-Brazilian
material. In 1958 Rubens Borba de Moraes in his bibliography
Bibliographia Brasiliana: a bibliographical essay (1958) described the
John Carter Brown Library as one of the most important collections
of this material. Fifty years later that area has been vastly increased, a
fact recognized by the Brazilian government, which gave Fiering an
award. Another important addition was the Bromsen Latin American
collection centring on Simon Bolivar. This was particularly impor-
tant because it fulfilled our mandate to expand to collection towards
1830. Then there were the large number of Evans US imprints acquired
from the sale of duplicates in the Library Company of Philadelphia.
Years ago a knowledgeable scholar in the field told me that, although
the American Antiquarian Society had the most Evans items, from the
point of view of textual content our holdings were better.

During my first week at the John Carter Brown Library Lawrence
Wroth took me around the main room and the two front rooms case
by case explaining to me the significance of the more important books
in each one. When he was finished he turned and said: ‘I have just re-
newed my understanding of what a truly remarkable institution this is.’
That was after he had been there thirty-four years writing about almost
every facet of it. Fifty years later, what does the future hold? Here are
some factors that might be kept in mind. First, there is the fact that there
are a finite number of books in the circumscribed area of our collecting.
Dennis Landis tells me that we have between a quarter and a third of
the items in European Americana. The likelihood of our ever getting all of
them is nil. Some are unique: a large number are listed with only two
or three locations. Short of upheavals like the French Revolution and
the Napoleonic Wars, which made John Carter Brown’s early collect-
ing possible, the likelihood of any large number of these books coming
on the market is slight. Then there is the span of time in which we work.
When John Carter Brown began collecting about 1830 with a terminal
date of 1800 he was covering 91 per cent of the history of the Americas
as recorded in the printed book. By the time I arrived we had dropped to
66 per cent. Today with the increased coverage to about 1830 the figure
stands at 63 per cent. The most obvious areas of growth, within the con-
cept of ‘the Colonial Period’ that I adopted, are the countries of Central
and South America and the West Indies where the end of colonialism
varied greatly. However, I also felt that the two ocean areas, Atlantic
and Pacific, could be included in our collecting. After all, the Philippine
Islands were a part of the Viceroyalty of New Spain and that direction
had been pointed out by Wroth in 1944 with his The Early Cartography
of the Pacific. These seem to me to be collecting opportunities for the
future. Then there is the whole field of the history of the book. Given
our restriction to the printed book an understanding of how it has func-
tioned within our areas of interest is important.
Another aspect for the future lies in our association with the Brown University Library. Its Special Collections in the John Hay Library are by no means as minor as they were when the John Carter Brown Library arrived in 1904. Today it includes major collections of incunabula (Annmary Brown), military history, the history of science both physical and natural, American poetry, Abraham Lincoln, just to name a few. Then there are a number of important collections of archival manuscripts—all listed in Special Collections at Brown University: a history and guide (1988). One in particular is of importance to us: the George Earl Church collection of Latin Americana, which is especially strong in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century works on politics, history and science.

Lastly there is our responsibility to the knowledge and study of history. I can testify on the basis of both my experience at the John Carter Brown Library and my father’s experience at the William L. Clements Library that the history departments of the two institutions where they are situated played a negligible role in the affairs of the two libraries. This is because individual members of an academic department bring to their work their own agendas. The immediate interests of most of the faculty seldom match the resources of collections such as ours. A dimension of this was brought home to me soon after I arrived when a young history graduate student told me that he would like to be able to use the John Carter Brown Library but ‘all those books have been read’. Another recent development is the tendency of academic historians to write for each other rather than for a general public in the way that Samuel Eliot Morison once did. One consequence is a growing ignorance of our history on the part of the younger generation.

Norman Fiering has pointed out that there is an area that can present an interesting challenge. It is to extend the concept used in our collection of architectural books, which includes English and European books that were known to have been in the British colonies based on the bibliographic work of Helen Park. That is, to collect the works that are known to have been in American libraries during the Colonial Period. As he pointed out there are a number of sources for this information and it is a subject that has already been attacked by a number of scholars.

I believe that the future holds many opportunities for making the story of the New World even more fascinating. Concentrating on the printed record, we are in a position to understand both what people said they were doing and what they thought they were doing. Together with our increased archaeological and anthropological understanding of what went on, the whole subject will have a richer meaning.
Tom Adams and Jeanette Black with recent acquisition, the Hadji Ahmed Turkish World Map (1568) 1962

Tom Adams, Leslie Patterson (front), Susan Newbury, with the JCB’s first computer 1981. Photograph by Richard Hurley

Tom Adams on set of Providence television program, ‘Talk of the Town’ 1962. Photograph by John Quirk