



Heartland Science



Ohio's Legacy of Discovery & Innovation



Communications

From Greenbacks to Lexis-Nexis

America's Librarian

Dr. John Shaw Billings, a graduate of Miami University and the Medical College of Ohio in Cincinnati in 1860, became one of the world's most famous librarians. He started the famed National Library of Medicine, published the first Index Medicus, and directed the New York Public Library, where he pioneered many modern library innovations. He also convinced industrialist Andrew Carnegie to spend \$60 million to build nearly 3,000 free public libraries nationwide.



History of the National Library of Medicine (NLM)

NLM historical collections trace their beginnings to 1818. In that year Dr. Joseph Lovell, the first Surgeon General of the Army, filled a few of his office shelves with books, journals, and pamphlets to serve as a reference collection for the Army surgeons under his command. In 1836 the growing collection was officially named the Library of the Office of the Surgeon General, United States Army. After the Civil War, the Surgeon General's Library received an infusion of medical books and journals from the Army's temporary hospitals, which closed at the end of hostilities. To take charge of the burgeoning collection, the Army summoned 27-year-old career Army medical officer and book lover Dr. John Shaw Billings (1838-1913), who set out to create a comprehensive collection of medical materials. The relentless Dr. Billings wrote letters to physicians, editors, health and government officials, librarians, and society officers requesting donations, exchanges, and outright purchases. He accosted State Department officials traveling overseas, entreating them to bring back foreign medical books and journals.



Billings was so dedicated to his quest to build a world-class library that Oliver Wendell Holmes noted, "Dr. Billings is a bibliophile of such eminence that I regard him as a positive danger to the owner of a library, if he is ever let loose in it." Billings' voracious reading in the Library made him one of the most learned men of Gilded Age America. He was a top authority in such fields as public health administration, hospital design, vital statistics, scientific medicine, hygiene and ventilation technology, census organization, epidemiology, and science administration. Under his stewardship, the Library's roughly 2,300 medical volumes grew into a collection of some 124,000 bound volumes. By 1895 the Surgeon General's Library was the largest medical library in the Americas and possibly in the world.

Find out more...

- [National Library of Medicine \(www.nlm.nih.gov\)](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)
- [John Shaw Billings: An Autobiographical Fragment, 1965 \(www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/pdf/johnautobio.pdf\)](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/pdf/johnautobio.pdf)
- [John Shaw Billings Centennial, 1965 \(www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/pdf/john.pdf\)](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/pdf/john.pdf)