This paper explores the transformation of the Library of Congress from simply a reference library for the legislature into the national library of the United States. It argues that this process was the product of American culture in the late nineteenth century and analyzes the rhetoric and methods—particularly the passage of the Copyright Law of 1870 and the construction of a separate Library of Congress building—used to create the institution's status as a national library.

“...would not only be antagonistic to our free institutions, but directly in discord with the spirit of the age.”

- John Smithmeyer, Architect of the Library of Congress Building, 1881

Today the Library of Congress serves as the de facto national library of the United States and a repository of American knowledge and culture. When it was founded in 1800, however, it was simply a library of Congress—a legislative reference library—and while it still retains that function, the scope of its collections and services have grown exponentially since its founding. This paper explores the transformation of the Library of Congress from simply a legislative library into the national library of the United States. This process occurred during Ainsworth Rand Spofford's tenure as Librarian of Congress from 1864 to 1897, and he was instrumental in establishing the institution's status as the national library. I argue that Spofford's key accomplishments, the Copyright Law of 1870 and the construction of a separate Library of Congress building between 1886 and 1896, were inextricably linked with the broader culture of late nineteenth century America. Without this cultural context, the Library would not have become the national library of the United States. The paper begins with an overview of the ante-bellum Library, which demonstrates its limited scope relative to the institution's later expansion while recognizing developments during the period that contributed to its national character. I then move to a discussion of the Library under Spofford's direction, examining the rhetoric used to promote and disseminate the idea of a national library to Congress and the nation. Next, I connect this rhetoric to the larger growth of public libraries in the United States, with both the Library of Congress and municipal libraries presented as instruments to provide "culture" to the American public. These establishments propagated a unified and homogenous definition of American culture ordained by an intellectual elite, who hoped that doing so would firmly establish America as a western civilization. The final section of this paper analyzes the construction of a separate Library of Congress building, which was used—particularly through its interior decorations—as a pedagogical tool to further advance a westernized definition of American culture by giving the American public "an insight into the colossal array of knowledge which the human mind has accumulated and still gathers together." Thus, the transformation of the Library of Congress into America's national library was a direct manifestation of the "spirit of the age," coupling the nation's nationalistic ambitions with its faith in the power of public institutions to cultivate learning and culture.
THE ANTEBELLUM AND WARTIME LIBRARY

For the first decades of the Library of Congress's existence, it served solely as a legislative library with limited collections and scope. The Library of Congress was established on April 24, 1800, by an act signed by John Adams to provide "such books as may be necessary for the use of Congress"; reflecting this limited purpose, the Library was housed within the Capitol building in close proximity to the U.S. legislature. John Cole, Historian of the Library of Congress, affirms that the Library was not extensively used in this period, but also argues that three developments in the antebellum period established the Library's national character. First, it was created and operated by the national legislature; secondly, it was the first library of the American government, which all branches of the federal government and the general public could access since 1812; third, its collection was widely expanded in 1815, when it bought Thomas Jefferson's 6,487 volume personal library. The original collection, largely destroyed during the War of 1812, consisted exclusively of legal and historical works, but Jefferson's was far more expansive and provided "a most admirable substratum for a National Library." The purchase underscored its proponents' desire for American cultural institutions separate from those of Europe, but it was not overwhelmingly supported, with the bill authorizing the purchase passing in the House of Representatives by a narrow margin of ten votes. Generally, congressmen during this period viewed the Library as an exclusively legislative library, not a separate institution operating as a national library for the people. Attesting to this view, an 1817 proposal in Congress for a separate building for the Library was defeated in the House of Representatives, despite being supported by then-Librarian of Congress George Watterson.

In the early 1850s, there was a small movement to establish a national library at the Smithsonian Institution, led by its librarian Charles Jewett. However, the Smithsonian's secretary, Joseph Henry, opposed this movement--believing that the Institution should focus on research instead--and effectively ended it by firing Jewett in 1854. While unsuccessful in establishing a national library at the Smithsonian, Jewett's advocacy fostered a latent desire for such an institution in the United States. In the late 1850s, tensions over slavery superseded the nationalist sentiments which would later advance the creation of an American national library. Nonetheless, changes in the Library's administration during the Civil War provided a basis for its later growth. President Abraham Lincoln appointed John Stephenson as Librarian of Congress in 1861; Stephenson served as Librarian until 1864 and chose Ainsworth Rand Spofford as his assistant librarian. Spofford was chosen as Stephenson's replacement, and during his tenure from 1864 to 1897 he provided the impetus for transforming the Library of Congress into the national library of the United States. Spofford's first year was an auspicious start to this endeavor, with "the Library of Congress mov[ing] closer toward assuming the role of national library [in the first sixty-four days of 1865] than at any prior time," primarily through a bill passed on March 3, 1865 which afforded funds for the Library to enlarge its quarters within the Capitol building. Another major development came in 1866, when Joseph Henry transferred the Smithsonian Institution's entire library to the Library of Congress. These expansionary endeavors would prove to be important precursors to Spofford's later accomplishments in establishing the Library of Congress as America's national library.

NATIONALIST AMBITIONS AND THE COPYRIGHT LAW OF 1870

Following the Civil War and Reconstruction, strained antebellum relations gave way to a sense of national prosperity and unity among politicians in Washington D.C. The development of the Library of Congress as a national library was part of a "distinctly American epoch in world history that emerged after the Civil War with the final declaration of economic and cultural independence from Europe," in which "westward expansion and its simultaneous industrialization would have been readily understood as evidence of national progress and social evolution." During this period, the United States also witnessed a "shift in national ambitions from the settlement of new territories to the expansion of the mind," a concept of civilization that was furthered by the establishment of a de facto national library. Spofford took advantage of the era's nationalist sentiments to advance his vision of the Library of Congress as a national library which would help the country gain intellectual and cultural preeminence in western culture. The cornerstone of this project was the Copyright Law passed on July 8, 1870, which centralized all copyright activities at the Library and required a copy of every copyrighted work in the United States to be deposited there. By passing this law, Spofford argued to Congress, the legislature would provide a repository of American culture which would be "an invaluable aid to thousands" because "the Public intelligence and welfare are promoted by every extension of the means of acquiring knowledge." The Copyright Law consolidated the vast majority of material published in America into what Spofford called "one truly great and comprehensive library, worthy of Congress and the nation." The law essentially resolved the debate over which institution would serve as America's national library, although earlier developments, like the Smithsonian's transfer of its collection to the Library of Congress, provided a firm foundation for the Library's de facto designation as the national library of the United States.

This status was not simply conferred on the Library by Congress; rather, newspapers and periodicals helped to propagate the concept of a national library to the nation it was intended to serve and established its legitimacy in the cultural imagination. Newspapers shared Spofford's views with a larger audience, disseminating the idea that "the Library of the Government must become, sooner or later, a universal one." They published histories of the Library which discussed early developments in its history through the lens...
of its newfound status as the national library, describing the purchase of Jefferson’s personal library as “a good basis for a public library which might become worthy of the country” and his reference to the Library “with a sort of prophetic instinct [as] the ‘Library of the United States.” These histories implied that the national library status of the Library of Congress was envisioned by the nation’s founding fathers, thereby giving it political legitimacy. Newspapers praised the accessibility of “a library rather for the masses than for students,” which fulfilled Spofford’s vision of the Library as “the intellectual centre of a great capital” where journalists, architects, scientists, lawyers, clergymen, poetry enthusiasts, and genealogists from across the country could use the Library alongside their legislative representatives. Moreover, admission to the Library was not limited by race, as students of historically African American Howard University had access to “several large libraries…among them the Congressional Library of the Capitol” and access to the Library of Congress was promoted as an opportunity available to the whole of the American public. Through these arguments, newspapers helped to change the cultural conception of the Library of Congress into that of a national library used only by Congress.

In both Congressional acts and newspaper articles, the Library of Congress was linked to an intellectual literary tradition in western society which began with the libraries of ancient Greeks and Egyptians, extended through the national libraries of Europe, and would ideally culminate in the Library of Congress itself. The Atlanta Constitution argued that “in the progress of the world’s civilization no one will fail to admit that its greatest impetus has been in the circulation of literature,” elevating libraries as a whole as paragons of culture and vehicles of its expansion. The Chicago Tribune posited that “the British Museum is the model of all countries in respect to literature” and that the Library of Congress should model itself on the precedent set by Britain’s national library. During this period, however, the Library was “wofully [sic] inferior both in size and in character compared with the great National libraries abroad,” and in 1884 it ranked fifth in size among national libraries worldwide. While the Library of Congress was rhetorically elevated to a lofty position at the apex of western civilization, this position was conveyed as a goal rather than a well-established reality. The promotion of the Library of Congress, then, served both to construct a cultural image as the national library of the United States and to encourage the advancement of that role through an expansion in the Library’s scope and scale.

RISE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND THE ROLE OF A NATIONAL LIBRARY

In the late nineteenth century, the profession of librarianship and public libraries emerged across the United States, a movement that both shaped and was shaped by the Library of Congress. The American Library Association (ALA), founded in 1876, was a professional organization which allowed its members to share ideas about the roles and methods of librarianship; its founding reflected the professionalization and growth of the field in the post-war era. Members of the ALA were part of an intellectual elite who, “in their efforts to fashion the nation into a civilization, posited that freely accessible and ever-dynamic city libraries—and indeed, a great national library such as the Library of Congress—would,
along with the achievements of great poets, foster Culture.” Newspapers encouraged Americans to “take on stronger growth in knowledge and embrace better means of self-improvement [through] our libraries,” encouraging individuals to use the resources afforded to them by public libraries and especially the Library of Congress, “our national center of accumulated literature [in which] is found to exist the means of applying the most useful knowledge.”

Like public libraries, the Library of Congress was viewed as a channel through which the American public could become educated and cultured in a manner befitting the ambitions of the nation’s elite. The Joint Congressional Committee on the Library of Congress argued for an increase in the Library’s scope because “in books alone can be found the history and the philosophy of national growth…to a people self-governed, culture is a prime necessity” and financing the Library’s growth would expand the reach of “culture” on a national level. Thus, as increasing numbers of professional librarians advocated for the dissemination of knowledge to Americans through public libraries, their arguments were also applied to the expansion of a national library at the Library of Congress.

Librarians did not believe, however, that the general public should be given unfettered access to cultural materials; instead, they thought reading should be a disciplined activity following the precepts outlined by librarians themselves. To this end, librarians published readers’ guides—including Frederic Perkin’s 1872 *The Best Reading* and Spofford’s own *A Book for All Readers*, published in 1900—which included several key tenets for readers: “read with a purpose, read systematically and widely, digest what you read, and read with discrimination” and thus worked to shape the methods through which Americans consumed literature. Nineteenth century librarians also influenced Americans’ choice of books; as apostles of culture, they helped the public “read with discrimination [by steering] readers away from morally questionable or aesthetically inferior books and toward other and improving reading, thus fulfilling the true function of the library as an educator.”

Driven by a “pragmatic idealism in education and politics,” America’s librarians helped to establish “politico-cultural distinction as well as homogeneity over the subcontinent,” hoping to ensure that American ideas about culture would be viewed through a single, librarian-sanctioned lens. By defining which books constituted acceptable reading practices, these self-selected arbiters of culture worked to create a literary canon that would legitimize and elevate American intellectual achievements into a culture worthy of a great civilization.

Spofford’s writing reflected this larger attitude, and he used his authority as Librarian of Congress to promulgate the merits of selectivity in library collections to a nationwide audience in his *A Book for All Readers*. Seemingly paradoxically, he simultaneously advocated for the Copyright Law of 1870, which created almost universal inclusion within the Library of Congress of every book published in the United States. Spofford argued that “one comprehensive library—inclusive and not exclusive—should exist, because all other libraries must be in a greater or less degree exclusive.” This argument placed the national library within the larger movement for public libraries as directors of their users’ literary development, positing that the inclusion of “perpetual evidence of [the nation’s] literary history and progress—or retrogression, as the case may be” should be the function of the national library, not of local public libraries. By designating this responsibility to the Library of Congress, Spofford allowed public libraries to focus on shaping and refining the literary tastes of the American public. Therefore, his arguments for the creation of a comprehensive national library through the Copyright Law of 1870 were framed within the broader movement for public librarians to define the literary consumption of the nation.

**THE NEW LIBRARY OF CONGRESS BUILDING AS A NATIONAL MONUMENT**

After the passage of the Copyright Law of 1870, the Library of Congress amassed a volume of copyrighted material that far exceeded its quarters in the Capitol building. It quickly became evident that a separate library building—or a massive addition to the Capitol—was a spatial necessity, but Congress did not unanimously agree on the best way to provide new space for the Library. Spofford and the Joint Committee on the Library of Congress advocated for a separate building that would allow for the future expansion of an institution “which is fast becoming a just source of pride to American citizens.” A competition for the design of a new building was authorized by Congress in 1873 and won by architects John Smithmeyer and Paul Pelz. However, after visiting European national libraries in 1874, the chairman of the
Committee on the Library, Senator Timothy Howe, decided that the 1873 design was too small and plain and should be replaced by a design “more in keeping with the standing of our nation among the great powers.”28 While the Committee deliberated over the placement and design of the new building, other congressmen continued to advocate for an expansion of the Capitol rather than a separate building, causing the debate to stretch on for over a decade. Ultimately, after consulting architects and landscape architects, a separate library building was approved in 1880 for a site facing the east façade of the Capitol building, and debates narrowed to focus on the design of the new building.

The design of the new Library building was highly contested by professional librarians, architects, and congressmen, all of whom had strong opinions on the proper function of the building as the home of America’s national library. Smithmeyer and Pelz’s original Italian Renaissance plan was, per Spofford’s specifications, modelled on the British Museum, with a domed central reading room surrounded by three main stack corridors and an entrance pavilion. The British Museum was a relatively recent precedent, with its reading room, a “supreme, and highly influential, public manifestation of this triumphant autarchy of the national research library” completed in 1857.29 The façade of its design was modelled on the Garnier Opera House in Paris, completed from 1861 to 1875, and the choice of these two architectural precedents revealed the ambitions of the United States to establish a national culture comparable to those of Britain and France. The Committee on the Library supported this general symbolic purpose, but requested various alternate designs—French Renaissance, Romanesque, Gothic, German Renaissance—from Smithmeyer and Pelz, which, although drawing from a variety of sources, all revealed a desire to position the Library of Congress building within an architectural history that would symbolically connect it to its European predecessors. At the same time, many professional librarians—most notably Frederick William Poole, librarian of the Chicago Public Library—spurned monumental library architecture entirely, instead advocating for a functional design for the Library building with the “same secular common sense and the same adaption of means to ends which have built the modern grain elevator and reaper.”30 Spofford rejected this suggestion, arguing that the design of “a library building of national importance [should not be] dwarfed to the dimensions of a prolonged series of packing boxes.”31 Ultimately, the Committee decided that Smithmeyer and Pelz’s Italian Renaissance design provided an ideal combination of extensive book storage, room for expansion, and monumental architecture befitting what they hoped would become the nation’s preeminent cultural institution, and construction on the building began in 1886.

Along with the symbolic impact of its architecture, the design of the new Library of Congress building provided for its function as a center of public education, acting as a permanent counterpart to the cultural expositions of the late nineteenth century. As “a conspicuous symbol of the young nation’s purpose, of its cultural and scientific achievements, and of the importance it placed on the free dissemination of knowledge and information,” the new building provided a physical manifestation of America’s commitment to its nation’s culture.32 Moreover, Smithmeyer and Pelz’s design created exhibit halls in the building’s four corner pavilions, which would provide “our public an insight into the colossal array of knowledge which the human mind has accumulated and still gathers together.”33 This function echoed that of contemporary fairs, like Philadelphia’s 1876 Centennial Exhibition and the 1892 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, which literally exhibited various technological and cultural achievements to the general public. When the building opened in 1896, contemporary writers drew parallels between the painting, architecture, and sculptures found at these exhibitions and the “similarly comprehensive scheme of decoration” at the Library, which they referred to as “a national monument of art [that] marks an epoch in our history.”34 Furthermore, both these cultural exhibitions and the Library building demonstrated modern marvels of technology, most notably at the Library building in its innovative use of bookstacks (as opposed to bookshelves) and pneumatic tubes for carrying messages to Congress. Contemporary handbooks on the building described its decorations and functions for those who could not visit it in person, giving it a national influence far beyond its physical location in Washington.

The exhibitory nature of the new Library building was also reflected in its extensive and lavish interior, which was intended to glorify American cultural achievements and in doing so define which artists were legitimate representations of the nation’s culture. The building’s interior decoration scheme was coordinated by General Thomas Casey and his son Edward Casey, hired in 1888 to supervise the completion of the Library building after Smithmeyer was fired in a controversy over the architect’s choice of a cement vendor. General Thomas Casey had finished the Washington Monument in 1885, and choosing him to finish the Library of Congress building associated it with one of the most prominent national emblems of the United States. Edward Casey “invited the cooperation of every capable sculptor and painter he could find in the United States” to execute the building’s decorations and, in choosing these artists, he defined what constituted a “capable” artist and established a visual culture sanctioned by a national institution.35 Furthermore, throughout the building are inscribed the names of preeminent authors, scientists, inventors, artists, and religious figures from throughout history; for example, the ceiling of the staircase hall includes the names of ten authors—Dante, Homer, Milton, Bacon, Aristotle, Goethe, Shakespeare, Moliere, Moses, and Herodotus—who, although from different civilizations and eras, were all males within the western tradition. The names were chosen primarily by Spofford and Charles Eliot, president of Harvard University. Paralleling contempo-
rary views on the role of librarians as authorities on literary merit, these choices were made by members of a cultural aristocracy who intended to define a cultural canon by making use of the “pedagogical tenets of municipal art to enlighten, educate, and promote culture as a cohesive force.”36 The new Library building served as a monument to American—and by extension western—culture, but in choosing which aspects of that culture were glorified, Spofford and the building’s architects created and promulgated a limited definition of American culture.

The sculptures, paintings, and mosaics within the Library of Congress building perpetuate this idealistic definition of American culture in racialized, gendered, and westernized terms. Highly symbolic, the decorations “assumed an evolutionary model and positioned American culture at the apex of the trajectory of western civilization” typified by Philip Martiny’s two sculpture pairs halfway up the staircases in the entrance hall, which represent four continents—America, Africa, Asia, and Europe—as young boys clad in stereotypical garb.37 Europe holds a lyre, a book, and a Doric column, symbolizing “specifically, Music, Literature, and Architecture, and more broadly, the pre-eminence of the Caucasian races in the arts of civilization generally...just as the wampum and bow of the [American] Indian indicate his advance in culture over the stage of evolution typified by the rude war-club and savage necklace of the [African] negro.”38 The decorations presented a conception of civilization that was explicitly racialized and western-focused, dismissing all other cultural achievements as savage and inferior. Edwin Blashfield’s The Evolution of Civilization, a mural cycle decorating the collar of the central reading room’s dome, elevates this westernized conception of civilization at the highest point in the building. This apotheosis of American civilization was physically at the center of the Library building, paralleling its centrality to the mission of the institution as America’s national library. The mural cycle shows twelve figures from western culture personifying successive societies, beginning with Egypt and culminating with America, representing “the American Renaissance ideal of America as the culmination of history and the heir of the sum total of human knowledge, achievements, and culture” which was “embodied in the robust masculinity of [the personified] America.”39 Thus, the artwork within the new Library building was a physical manifestation of the cultural ideal held by the nation’s intellectual readers, an ideal which was largely limited to white males within their concept of western civilization.
CONCLUSION
The late nineteenth century witnessed a desire to create a uniquely American culture and edify the nation's public on that culture. This desire was reflected in the transformation of the Library of Congress into America’s national library, which functioned as a symbolic center of the nation’s intellectual achievements. This function was promoted by the Librarian of Congress, Ainsworth Rand Spofford, in conjunction with periodicals and handbooks which advanced his vision nationwide. To accomplish this transformation, Spofford successfully advocated for the Copyright Law of 1870 and the construction of a separate Library building, completed in 1897. The Copyright Law allowed the Library to amass almost all material published by the American press, creating a repository of American culture, while the construction of the Library building itself served as a secular temple to American art. Spofford and other intellectual leaders hoped that the Library would be a resource for the entirety of the American people, not just its legislature, by providing comprehensive resources for research and education. At the same time, however, the Library was a result of the era’s culture of exclusion in public libraries. The ideal municipal librarian would guide and direct the literary tastes of the public they served, a role which was facilitated by the comprehensive nature of the Library of Congress. By amassing a comprehensive central library, Spofford hoped, the Library of Congress would allow other public libraries to focus on literary merit in their collections rather than attempting to create their own comprehensive libraries. The idea of cultural exclusion was also echoed in the new Library building’s decorations, which presented a conception of culture focused on western civilization and the achievements of white men. Nonetheless, through the efforts of Spofford and his contemporaries, the Library of Congress became a truly national library that embodied the ideal of a national culture, freely accessible to all Americans, and an indispensable proponent of knowledge in the United States.
Endnotes


[2] Ibid.


[26] Ibid, 125.


[34] Herbert Small, 8; Royal Cortissoz, “A National Monument of Art,” Harper’s Weekly 39, no. 2036 (1895), 1241.


[38] Herbert Small, 2.