

Reclaiming the Research Library:  
The Founding of the Council on Library Resources

Deanna B. Marcum

The Library History Seminar  
Tuscaloosa, Alabama  
March 31, 1995

As many of us recollect the 1950s, it was a period of relative calm. The societal icons of the period include President Eisenhower on the golf course, relaxing after the Great War; the Cleaver family with a working dad, a stay-at-home mom, and peaceful resolutions to all problems; and black-and-white television sets that had become required living-room fixtures for most American families. For others, it was a time of blacklists, but also of great artistic ferment. For universities, this period connotes a volatile time of growth and redirection. Universities were beginning their first surge of great expansion as federal funds supported returning war veterans in pursuit of graduate and undergraduate education. New academic programs in area studies were the universities' answer to the problem of American insularity prior to World War II, but few institutions had the foreign collections to support such programs.

In this paper, I will explore how the world was viewed by a small group of highly educated white males, who saw troubling indicators of times ahead and tried to make a change. Because of current historical fashion, it is tempting to analyze the development of the Council on Library Resources (CLR) as a gender issue, or a class issue, or even as a privileged private institution issue. But I have emphasized looking at the world through the eyes of its founding fathers--to understand who they were, to explore their connections with one another, to find out what they worried about, and to discover what they did about their fears and concerns.

When I was first employed by the council, I had done very little

to educate myself about the organization's history. Any questions about the formative days had elicited only a mythical version of history: "We gathered around a bottle of Heaven Hill, and when we reached the bottom of the bottle, we had a Council on Library Resources."<sup>1</sup>

Even from that anecdote, of course, it is clear that a gentleman's club approach was a significant factor, but it took far more than a bottle of bourbon to set the stage for this unique organization. It took an individual with absolute commitment. It is not an overstatement that the Council on Library Resources would not have existed had it not been for Louis B. Wright, the director of the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. Determined, even dogged, he brought groups together, petitioned the Ford Foundation for funds, and wrote letters soliciting support from all quarters of the academic community. More significantly, he worked out all of the details in back rooms, bars, and hotel lobbies, and through a voluminous correspondence. Louis Wright left nothing to chance, and he did not believe in consensus. Consulting others was an accepted convention, but he seriously limited the group of confidants. The Council on Library Resources was born from his conviction that research libraries faced serious problems that required a new overarching organization built on intellect and conviction, not on pretentious notions about professionalism or representation of the various segments of the population.

From the written record, it looks as if the council traces its

history back to a letter on 14 October 1954, when Wright explained a problem that he saw as needing attention from the Ford Foundation:

I personally would welcome a study of means of reproducing documents....[A] representative group of scholars, librarians, and scientists who know something about the needs in this field could profitably make a survey of the present status of process for reproducing documents and come up with a factual report that would be immensely beneficial.<sup>2</sup>

Wright continued to say that he believed university libraries were competing with one another, and in the process expending large sums of money. He cited his own institution as an example. The Folger's interest in becoming the premier place for the study of British civilization of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could never be realized unless a new way could be found to reproduce documents.<sup>3</sup>

The need to find adequate methods of document reproduction seems to have been the driving force for Louis Wright to convene a meeting at the Folger Library to talk about the problem, but Wright's interest in the question triggered a chain of events that led to the creation of one of the very few foundations that has existed in this country with the exclusive purpose of helping libraries solve their collective problems.

Wright did not awake one morning with the idea that he would

write to the Ford Foundation and seek a grant for this purpose. Wright and Fred Cole, Ford's program officer for education, were long-time friends, and they had talked about this idea just days before over breakfast in the Wright family home. It is clear that Wright had requested Ford funds for a meeting on document reproduction at Cole's suggestion. Fred Cole responded to the letter on 26 October 1954. It was an "on-hold" letter that foundations often send to grant proposers letting them know there is interest, but no action will be taken right away; but Wright must have known with some certainty that he would receive the money he requested for a meeting of "men who will not be too much influenced by narrow self-interest."<sup>4</sup> Long before he had heard from Cole, he had drafted a letter of invitation to a meeting that he hoped to schedule in December. He planned to invite twenty participants to the meeting, and he cited the intense interest of Dr. Leonard Carmichael, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, and Dr. L. Quincy Mumford, librarian of Congress, who, along with Wright, thought the time was right to discuss "several matters that are critically important for all research libraries."<sup>5</sup> Wright, somewhat uncharacteristically, waited until he heard officially from Cole that the money would be forthcoming before he mailed the letter to his colleagues. In the meantime, Cole invited Wright to a meeting at the Ford Foundation to discuss the idea further and, on 15 November 1954, Wright submitted a formal proposal to H. Rowan Gaither, president of the foundation. Only then did Wright approach Carmichael and Mumford to secure their cooperation in hosting the proposed meeting.

By 1 December 1954, the Ford Foundation had agreed to provide \$6,000 for the conference, and Wright had issued letters of invitation before a week had gone by. Still, there was not enough time to plan for a meeting in Washington during December. The date was fixed for 15 January 1955, a Saturday, so that university officers would be able to attend.

Louis Wright was concerned about photoduplication and the best technology for adding to the strength of research library collections, but he was also concerned about professional librarians, a group he did not hold in high regard. One particular group, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), aroused his ire:

In particular, I think the Association of Research Libraries--so-called--is going to want to have a large voice. We certainly want to utilize any information and any help we can get from them, but they too have shown very little enterprise and even less imagination. The trouble with them is that they are very profession-conscious, and some of the lesser ones believe that nothing can be done without the blessing of card-carrying A.L.A. members. That attitude has cursed progress up to now and I don't intend to have our operation dominated by this group.<sup>6</sup>

Wright's contempt for the new breed of research librarian would surface again and again in his letters. He used this concern repeatedly as a reason for acting promptly before the ARL directors

established another direction.

Wright, a gentleman and a scholar-librarian, determined to make a success of the meeting in January, worried about any accusations of self-interest. In all of the letters written during the weeks just before the meeting, he pointed out to friend and acquaintance alike that it was appropriate for the Folger Library to have received this grant from Ford, for his was one institution that had no vested interest.

By the time the actual meeting was held in January, Wright had invited fifty participants, and he had expanded the scope of the meeting to include "useful plans for solving some of the problems that perplex all libraries that have the complex problems of gathering, preserving, and disseminating research materials."<sup>7</sup> Wright had no patience for the democratic conferences librarians often crafted in which everyone had a chance to express opinions, but took no action; he called on participants to make this an active conference.

The men present were urged to work together as a consultative body, not a parliamentary group. Wright set the tone for the day by calling on the participants to "stick to simple Mr. as a term of address in the meeting....We'll assume that everybody here is several times a doctor or director or dean or president and proceed with our business."<sup>8</sup> Wright further reminded those assembled that they were chosen for their minds, not for the institutions that they represented. Yet the individuals who attended the meeting were, by and large, from the most prestigious institutions. Among the fifty

participants, approximately half carried the title librarian, although many of them were scholar-librarians like Louis Wright. Approximately a third of those who came were chief administrative officers of universities, and the rest were practicing scholars.<sup>9</sup> The room was filled with the power brokers of the academic establishment. The only female in the room was Marlene Morrisey, Wright's secretary, who dutifully recorded the proceedings and turned them into a typed report one week later.

From the proceedings, two types of conflicts emerge: the tension between scholars and librarians and the tension between scientists and humanists. Wright did not confront these conflicts head-on; instead, he diplomatically offered sixteen conclusions in the written report that the group had reached. The list is long and varied enough that surely all participants would have found their favorite issue among them.<sup>10</sup>

Wright enclosed a summary of each session's discussions, along with the sixteen recommendations, and sent the document to all of those who attended the January 15 meeting. Several participants mailed back fuller elaborations of the points they made, often serving to highlight the tensions that surfaced in the meeting. Herman Fussler, director of the University of Chicago Library, in his five-page letter to Wright, opened yet another point of conflict when he urged Wright to pay more attention to a serious research agenda. He included a copy of his own recent article on the use patterns of the literature in physics and chemistry.



There was still too much variety in thoughts for future action. On 2 March 1955, Wright sent another letter to the Ford Foundation requesting an additional \$10,000 to carry on the work of studying library problems. On March 7, the Ford Foundation replied affirmatively, and enclosed a check for the requested amount.

Wright, convinced that a smaller group was essential, wasted no time in inviting a few key leaders to a meeting in his office on March 31. He prepared a discussion paper in which he proposed establishing a National Library Commission, which he viewed as an independent agency that would attack problems directly. Probably taking indirect aim at Herman Fussler, Wright noted, "For more than thirty years we have been making surveys of library resources and needs. We now need to begin work on some of the acute problems that we know exist from surveys already made." He imagined a board of twelve to fifteen individuals and an executive committee of four or five, who would meet regularly. This board would not be focused exclusively on the problems of the great university and research libraries, because "some of the most acute library problems in American society concern the colleges and the public libraries in our smaller cities and towns."<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, though Wright claimed in January that technological solutions were important reasons for the meeting, technical issues figured in only a minor way in his discussion paper for the March meeting. The nine areas he identified for discussion in the second meeting were: (1) cooperation between research libraries; (2) adequate communication of plans and programs between libraries; (3) problems peculiar to the

college library; (4) problems peculiar to the smaller public libraries; (5) scientific aids to learning; (6) utilization of surveys and studies now available and to be made; (7) international relations of libraries; (8) freedom of access to materials; and (9) special libraries and their social utility. The group was convened to confirm Wright's plan.

On 31 March 1955, fifteen distinguished gentlemen gathered to discuss these ideas. The librarians included Keyes Metcalf, who was just retiring from Harvard, and Paul Buck, the new librarian designate of Harvard; Frederick Wagman, who had left the Library of Congress (LC) to become the director of the University of Michigan Library; and Ralph Ellsworth, director of libraries of the University of Iowa. The federal sector was represented by the librarian of Congress, Quincy Mumford, and his assistant, Verner Clapp; the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Leonard Carmichael; and U. S. Archivist Wayne Grover. Academic officers were Arthur Coons, president of Occidental College; Conrelis deKiewiet, president of the University of Rochester; Joseph Morris, vice president of Tulane University and chair of the Physics Department; Barnaby Keeney, dean of the College, Brown University; and two scholar/editors, Lyman Butterfield, editor-in-chief of the Adams Papers, and Julian Boyd, editor of the Jefferson Papers. The university officers and the editors were all close friends of Wright's.

The Ford Foundation agreed to fund the organization that had been proposed, and sent a letter on 7 May 1956 announcing its intent to

award \$5 million to get it started. Verner Clapp, who had impressed the group with his grasp of library issues and was considered particularly rational in his approach, was asked to draft a statement that could be used to announce the award and describe the purposes of the new organization.

Louis Wright's influence continued to be strong. His work behind the scenes paid off. When the Ford Foundation announced the formation of the Council in September 1956, Verner Clapp was simultaneously named the first president.

Why Verner Clapp was willing to leave his post of deputy librarian of Congress may be best explained by Betty Milum's recent article, "Eisenhower, ALA, and the Selection of L. Quincy Mumford."<sup>12</sup> She described the political climate that surrounded the selection process for librarian of Congress, noting that Clapp was the overwhelming favorite candidate in the library community, including the LC staff. Clapp's nomination, although strongly endorsed by a number of influential university administrators and library leaders, was soon dropped from consideration, because Senator John Marshall Butler found Clapp unacceptable.<sup>13</sup> Clapp had allowed an exhibit to go public that contained a photograph that showed Butler in an unflattering way, and Butler refused to help him gain even more authority. Eisenhower, wanting to avoid political controversy with his nomination, opted to appoint the only other librarian on the list of candidates, L. Quincy Mumford.

The library community had urged the nomination of a professional,

and soon rallied around the Mumford nomination, but a number of Clapp's friends continued to feel that he had been treated very badly in the highly visible process, and vowed to find ways to help him achieve a worthy level of leadership.

Wright had worked with Fred Cole at the Ford Foundation to secure Clapp's appointment as president, and together they assembled a list of names for board membership. Wright had tried to persuade W. McNeil Lowry, also a Ford program officer, to name the board members as one of the terms of the grant, but Lowry refused, pointing out this was contrary to Ford's policies. He assured Wright that he understood and appreciated his attempt to have the right kind of board. He added to the terms of agreement that changes in board composition must be approved by the sitting CLR board and by the Ford Foundation.<sup>14</sup> Virtually all of the proposed board members, except the chairman, Gilbert Chapman, were friends of Wright. The composition was heavily weighted toward the university community. In all there were three university presidents, two university vice presidents, one commercial publisher, one historical documentary editor, one lawyer, and one librarian.

In addition to being Louis Wright's friends, the board members shared many other things in common: most of them were members of the Cosmos Club in Washington, D.C., or other social clubs in other cities, many were published authors, most of them had a special relationship with the Ford Foundation, and many had worked together on other scholarly or professional projects. Clapp was not so well known

to the others, but they trusted Wright's assessment of the right person to take on responsibility for this new organization.

Up until the board was assembled, everything had gone Wright's way. He had written the reports for Ford, emphasizing those points he considered important, and he had worked out all of the details about governance and management with Cole. Over breakfast in the Wright household or over a glass of bourbon at the Cosmos Club, these two men created *de novo* an organization that would, at least in their minds, go around the professional "silliness" they saw in the American Library Association (ALA) and the Association of Research Libraries. The new librarians who were being named to head university libraries, especially in the rapidly growing land grant institutions during the 1950s, were not scholars. They saw librarianship in a more vocational light than these gentlemen-scholars.

Wright fervently believed that the scholars who loved books and libraries had a different level of understanding than this new breed of professional, who seemed anxious to engage in techniques rather than scholarly substance. Wright also scorned the political machinations of the professional library associations. He considered them to be talking to one another, not to people who could make changes or get things done. He worried that their egos were inflated and that they created a kind of false reality by engaging in political battles with one another. Wright thought library schools, which were being created in significant numbers, were "for the most part a hoax."<sup>15</sup> He considered the curriculum "utter rubbish" and complained,

"they have emphasized so-called professionalism to the point where their product is frequently both stupid and complacent but thinks it is worth much more than it is because it is 'professionally' trained."<sup>16</sup> Moreover, there were too many of them.

Wright showed no inclination toward taking on the Association of Research Libraries directly. When ARL president Robert Miller read the report of the second Folger conference, he sent a biting letter to Wright, objecting to the grandiosity of goals and the failure to include ARL and ALA in his planning.<sup>17</sup> Miller's hostile letter carried a notation that it was a personal letter, with no carbons, because Miller wanted to engage only Wright in the discussion. Wright, always the networker, however, sent copies of the letter to several of his friends, noting, "[I]t seems that if the Association of Research Libraries can't have it all, he would rather not play. In my opinion this is a completely damfool attitude."<sup>18</sup> But Wright did not try to persuade Miller that he was right. Instead, he simply proceeded with building a new organization that would include only those he considered colleagues to shape an agenda for the future of university libraries.

Wright's first disappointment came when the Ford Foundation accepted all of his recommendations for board membership, but insisted on naming a solid, highly visible businessman as chairman of the board. Wright was not pleased, as evidenced in a letter to a colleague:

Confidentially, they want a prominent businessman or industrialist sympathetic to libraries and skilled in administrative procedures. Until they find that kind of person the organization of the board of directors will have to wait.<sup>19</sup>

Even after the foundation was operating, Wright was skeptical of Chapman's perspective. At first, Wright simply asked questions about Chapman's real expertise and interest, and complained slightly to his close friends about being forced to accept a businessman to lead his creation. It was not until a year and a half later when Wright's great annoyance came through. He was angry that the board meetings were too haphazard, were not scheduled on a regular basis, and too often did not focus on the substantive issues. Letters went back and forth between the two, revealing a decided animosity and lack of agreement on the purpose of the organization. An executive committee meeting of the board had been scheduled in early January to work out some of the, by then, very visible differences between Chapman and Wright. Wright, in reporting on the meeting to W. McNeil Lowry of the Ford Foundation, revealed his deep bitterness toward Chapman, not as an individual, but as a type:

I guess we can educate Chapman but sometimes I wonder whether it is worth it. I have spent so much of my life educating slow-witted tycoons that I am beginning to get a little weary.<sup>20</sup>

## The Council's Agenda

While Louis Wright was managing the political agenda associated with forming the new organization, Verner Clapp was busily establishing a program for the Council. In so many ways, Clapp and Wright were opposites. Clapp did not think of himself as a scholar, nor was he formally trained as a librarian. He was born in 1901 in South Africa to his American father and English mother, and moved to Poughkeepsie, New York, in 1905. He was graduated from Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1922 and moved to Washington, where his parents were living. He found temporary employment at the Library of Congress as a manuscripts cataloger. At the end of that summer, he went to Cambridge to study philosophy at Harvard, thinking he would eventually enter the ministry, but at the end of the academic year he returned to the Library of Congress, where he remained until he was named president of the Council on Library Resources.

From boyhood, Clapp had been a tinkerer. He was highly energetic and was interested in almost everything. He loved gadgets, and was forever thinking about what could be invented to make library jobs more efficient or streamlined. All of these traits would show up repeatedly in his years of leading the Council.

Quincy Mumford had been the official representative of the Library of Congress to the two Folger conferences that Wright had planned, but Mumford requested that Clapp also be invited, acknowledging that Clapp had been working in these broad areas for a much longer time and had more ideas about what needed to be



accomplished.

Clapp's fascination with applied technology brought into sharp focus the conflict that existed within the board between those who advocated pure research and those who wanted to pursue practical applications. From the day Clapp moved to the Council, he was anxious to do practical things. He had few ties with the scholarly community, and had limited interest in that world. Clapp had not worked with boards before, but he had enough dealings with congressional committees and staffs to know that communication was an important element in success. Before he had completed a full year in his new position, Clapp established a newsletter that was distributed only to the board of directors. In it, he listed the grants that had been made, described the projects that were under review, included any council policies or publications that had been developed recently, and, where applicable, commented on what other foundations were doing in support of libraries. Occasionally, he ran across interesting articles and sent those or called them to the attention of the board.

While at the Library of Congress, Clapp had been much interested in standardized cataloging, so it is not surprising that the first grant made by the council was to the American Library Association to assure an American representative to an international meeting on cataloging standards. The other grants made by the board at its first annual meeting included a grant to Rutgers Library School to identify the research that needed to be done in librarianship; a grant to the Virginia State Library to study the causes of book deterioration; and

a grant to the University of Virginia to study the feasibility of using closed circuit television as a method of viewing catalog cards of libraries from remote locations.

A large number of grants were awarded to the Library of Congress over the twelve years Clapp presided over the council. Virtually all of them were directed at using technology to streamline cataloging procedures or to involve LC with the international library community. But the greatest number of grants were made to various educational and commercial institutions that promised to develop a new gadget--a new technological method--for solving a library problem.

Clapp worked hard to inform his board about what was happening, but he did not expect them to guide the foundation. Clapp developed his own very practical agenda, and he worked exceedingly hard to accomplish specific tasks. His view of the foundation underscored its operating status, for he methodically chose what projects needed attention and then sought individuals and institutions that could work on the problem.

Clapp's long tenure at the Library of Congress no doubt shaped his more bureaucratic approach to accomplishing tasks. While Wright was always behind the scenes securing agreements before meetings were held, Clapp was, by temperament and by experience, more inclined to identify problems, identify good people to solve them, and turn them loose. Wright had secured Clapp as the foundation's first president by working out all of the details behind closed doors, and he was never fully comfortable with the pragmatist's methods.

After the council had been operating for a few years, Wright grew increasingly concerned about its influence and its results. Wright had never been happy with Chapman's appointment; he had lost confidence in Clapp's ability to rise above his fascination with gadgetry in order to address what Wright considered the real problems; and the board continued to be divided when considering what the central purpose of the council should be.

In 1958, all of the tensions that had been building since the beginning came to a head. Wright wrote impassioned letters to his friends at the Ford Foundation, urging them to take action to redirect the council. Wright wrote to his friends on the board, urging them to demand a different course of action. Fred Cole convinced Clapp that he must bring a small, select group of advisors together to assess the directions of the Council. On 28 May 1958, Clapp chaired a meeting of nine experts to review the CLR program. Clapp outlined the different points of view to start the discussion:

There have developed two variant, although not necessarily contradictory, views within the membership of the Board of Directors concerning the direction which the Council's program should take. One position holds that the Council's primary purpose should be the support of basic research aimed at making the fullest use of the capabilities of modern technology to solve the library problem....The other view argues for immediate development of devices and systems aimed at the practical

solution of obvious and immediate problems.<sup>21</sup>

The thirteen-page summary ended with, "The meeting concluded on the note that there are many problems needing attack, and much work for the Council to do."<sup>22</sup> While that conclusion seems anticlimactic as the final note in a report filled with ideas from some of the most prominent leaders in higher education and librarianship, it may be the most important clue in understanding the development of the Council on Library Resources. Instead of choosing one direction over the other, the board and the advisors to the council yielded to the opinions of the "professional librarian," Verner Clapp.

Louis Wright continued on the board as vice chairman until November 1983, shortly before his death in February 1984. Even after his retirement from the board, he continued to serve on selection committees from time to time and he maintained a general interest in the foundation's work. But his cherished vision of the scholar/librarian setting the standards for research librarianship was not realized.

Over time, the council has made enormous contributions to the development of librarianship and higher education. The conflicts between basic research and applied technology have not been resolved, but many see that as one of the council's strengths. It has been viewed as an honest broker who can bring together the varying points of view and reach an agreement on directions and actions.

The evaluation of the council nearly forty years later remains to

be written, as do the many chapters that describe the programs and accomplishments and disappointments that characterize each of the presidents. What is clear is that it is possible for one person who believes strongly in the value of an organization to leave an indelible mark on society. Louis Wright assured a proper start for the Council on Library Resources. By sheer will, he kept the fledgling organization on track. Later, others with personalities almost as strong exerted their own brands of moral force on the agenda of an organization that has set itself apart, demanding quality even when there were nearly overwhelming counterforces. This heritage has been the strength or the curse of the Council on Library Resources, depending upon who is telling the story. But those stories will be told by others.

## Notes

1. Personal conversation with Fred Wagman, Director Emeritus of the University of Michigan Libraries, November 1988.
2. Wright to Fred Cole, 14 October 1954. Wright's correspondence is housed in the Gelman Library's Special Collections, George Washington University.
3. Wright to Cole, 14 October 1954.
4. Wright to Cole, 14 October 1954.
5. Draft letter from Wright to prospective participants in the meeting.
6. Wright to Cole, 31 December 1954.
7. Typescript of Wright's introductory remarks at the Folger Library, 15 January 1955.
8. Wright's address to the conference participants, 15 January 1955.
9. A complete list of participants and their affiliations is available from the author.
10. A complete list of recommendations is available from the author.
11. Louis B. Wright, "Notes for Discussion," unpublished paper, used for discussion at the 31 March 1955 meeting at the Folger Library.
12. Betty Milum, "Eisenhower, ALA, and the Selection of L. Quincy Mumford," Libraries and Culture 30, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 26-56.
13. Fred Wagman to Betty Milum, 16 March 1984.

14. Lowry to Wright, 11 May 1956.
15. Wright to Cole, 5 December 1955.
16. Wright to Cole, 5 December 1955.
17. Robert Miller to Wright, 12 April 1955.
18. Wright to Cole, 15 April 1955.
19. Wright to Charles David, 13 January 1956.
20. Wright to Lowry, 13 January 1958.
21. Summary of Discussion, Meeting of Advisory Panel to Review CLR Program, Cosmos Club, Washington, D.C., 28 May 1958.
22. Summary of Discussion, p. 13.