

CHARLES AMMI CUTTER

In the quiet solitude of his New Hampshire residence, Charles Ammi Cutter passed away in 1903 after a long bout with pneumonia. In remembrance of his friend and colleague, Charles A. Cutter, William E. Foster wrote in Cutter's obituary:

While Mr. Cutter's nature was essentially scholarly, and while he may most be said to have abhorred an inaccuracy in every fiber of his being, it would be a most serious error to conceive of him as a pedant, or as a "Dr. Dryasdust." (Cutter 1931, 60)

To the library community and to anyone who knew him, Charles Cutter was one of the founding figures who established the catalog record's foundational structure amid his many other valuable contributions to the cataloging field. He brought a sense of respect and leadership to the library profession through his active role in library management, scholarly pursuits, library education, and passive activism within the community. He brought a touch of wit and humor to his relationship with people as an avid dancer and adventurer. The culmination of Cutter's career and passion, however, centered on his revolutionary, cataloging classification system and his efforts to implement change in the public access of library materials.

From humble beginnings in Boston, Charles Cutter forsook the clergy life for the scholarly pursuit of education. The devout Cutter family consisted mainly of farmers with strong religious convictions. Several men in the Cutter family held the forename "Ammi" derived from the biblical meaning of "my people." Born in 1837 to Hannah (Bigelow) Cutter who soon died two months after childbirth, Charles' paternal aunts undertook the responsibility to provide him the home, family, and education to grow. His early education began with Hopkins Classical School in 1851, receiving top honors and graduating from Harvard College in 1855 and Harvard Divinity School in 1859, with the prospect of entering the clergy (Immroth 1991, 27). Varying sources on Cutter speculate as whether his change in career goals from the clergy to librarianship resulted from a change of interest sparked by his appointment to library assistant of Harvard libraries, the inspiration of a head cataloger, his soft-spoken, passive nature and frail condition unsuited to clergy life, his love for the literary form, or the influence of his aunt a librarian. Whatever his reasoning, the effects of Cutter's decision to pursue librarianship

in 1860 has benefited both libraries, the library community of librarians, and patrons in the efficiency of access through the development of Cutter's unique cataloging system.

Cutter's entrance into librarianship starting with his appointment to assistant librarian of Harvard libraries in 1860 marked the beginning of a lifelong obsession to create the universal classification system, tireless devotion to intellectual learning, and a commitment to his belief in providing the public equal access to resources in the library. During Cutter's time, a library's catalog, organized by folio volumes alphabetically by title, contained sheets of each resource's bibliographic record in the library collection. The library catalog's voluminous folio compilation, including some resources spanning over multiple volumes and alphabets, could only be handled and understood through the assistance of library attendants. Subject and author indexes rarely existed. When Cutter came to the Harvard College Library in 1860 under the supervision of Dr. Ezra Abbot, head cataloger, he assisted Abbot in the compilation of a card catalog "two by five inches" in size which included an author and alphabetical-classed index of the more than 100,000 bound volumes and pamphlets in the library's collection (Cutter 1931, 9-14). Concurrently, Cutter developed a 150-page catalog for the Reverend Thomas Prince in the Boston Public Library in 1868. The cataloging experience Cutter gained at the Harvard College Library and Boston Public Library prepared him for his new appointment to librarian of the Boston Athenaeum in 1869 where he remained for the next 26 years effecting change in policy through a proactive approach between library administration and the public community.

In his new authoritative position, Charles Cutter saw the opportunity to implement positive change through an efficient classification system in one of the nation's most venerated proprietary libraries housing the greatest collection of classical books. His predecessor, William Poole, suggested the need for a subject-class catalog since the alphabetic-title catalog proved ineffectual in its usability for efficient access. Appalled at the inconsistent format and errors plaguing the catalog due to inexperienced predecessors, Cutter felt the catalog should have been "thrown into the fire" to start anew (Miksa, 172). Notwithstanding the challenge to revise the Athenaeum's entire catalog, Cutter in 1874 developed the Boston Athenaeum's new 3,402-page dictionary catalog of its approximately 90,000 or more bound collection. Cutter received much praise for his laborious and successful work elevating his credibility among the library's famous proprietors. Soon thereafter he published his *Rules for a Dictionary Catalog* in 1875, establishing the rules necessary for the creation of a library's dictionary catalog and explaining

the basis for the Athenaeum's catalog structure. The main basis for these rules, other than to create cataloging standards among libraries, arose from Cutter's fervent belief that the "convenience of the public is always to be set before the ease of the cataloger (Cutter 1935, 6). Yet, Cutter relied on his own experience to determine convenience for the user rather than on any user studies (Hufford 1991, 31). Cutter's rules became the framework for modern cataloging standards as evident in sections on form of entry and record description structure. Rules regarding the entry of subject, author, and title assist in the formation of subject headings and other access points to increase user accessibility. Noticeably, Cutter's classification scheme reflects the structure of the subject heading classes found in the Library of Congress Subject Headings which the Library of Congress eventually built upon. Similarly, his rules regarding the choice of access points and the record description also formed the basis for the modern Anglo-American Cataloging Rules used in descriptive cataloging. The rules for Cutter's dictionary catalog went through many revisions and editions from its widespread popularity and use; Cutter reorganized the fourth edition for its adaptability to the card catalog (Cutter 1935, 6). Following the success of the dictionary catalog, Cutter's next greatest and exhaustive work embodying Cutter's principle for ease of access related to the compilation of a working classification scheme for the Boston Athenaeum's dictionary catalog in 1891.

Cutter remained vigilant in the movement of persuading libraries to catalog records using a classification scheme rather than an alphabetic arrangement to improve the efficiency of accessing records. A prevalence of alphabetically-arranged libraries existed during his time due to the ease of arranging the collection and the ease of understanding the arrangement. While alphabetizing may afford simplicity in its design and accessibility for a small collection, libraries at the turn of the century continued to expand in the growth of its collection. Disadvantages to libraries with larger collections include the inability to keep track of misplaced books, the difficulty in finding books on certain topics, and the unsystematic way of alphabetically arranging books by either their title or author. Melvil Dewey and Charles Cutter remained at the forefront of these issues and addressed these problems by constructing their own classification schemes arranged by subject classes. Cutter titled his classification system, *The Expansive Classification*, in recognition of the expanding growth of the library collection and the ability for his system to expand in growth by the addition of new classes or notation (Bliss 1933, 230). In his classification scheme Cutter created four divisions: Philosophy, Art, Math, and History.

Through the years, 1891-1903, Cutter introduced a seven-tier classification scheme representing the level in size of a library's collection. Each classification level, beginning with the first classification, included captions (notation) corresponding with a certain topic; the next level would build upon the previous level and contain even more captions with more specific subtopics. For instance, the First Classification suitable for a small library presented only 11 captions on a page whereas the Sixth Classification covered 51 pages and a thousand subdivisions. Unfortunately, Cutter's best working model, heavily revised and reedited, in the Seventh Classification could not be finished due to its author's untimely death. The notation for Cutter's scheme followed an alpha-numeric or numeric-alpha order. His numerals often referred to as "mnemonic numerals" characterized those numerals falling in a logical, sequential order based on the hierarchy of class subordination (Bliss 1933, 231). Although Cutter's ambitious work to reorganize the library's collection for greater efficiency in accessibility presented a new approach in the use of subject class headings that was innovative for its time, a few deficiencies in its structure prevented its full integration into modern cataloging practice. Firstly, the modification necessary for a library to move from one classification level to another would require too much work to reclassify everything. Secondly, the mnemonic numerals became too large and complex to follow a logical order system. Thirdly, the alphabetic notation of classes resulted in an uneven distribution of class sizes and relational subdivision subordination. For example, in the sciences Mathematics has 40 pages devoted to schedules whereas Economics has only eight. Similarly, the general subject of Electrical Engineering has a subsection (TDZ) while the specific topic of Electric Current Generation has an entire section (TE) (Bliss 1933, 233-241). Most importantly, his subject rules did not include form entry which meant placing the name in the primary sequence of headings (Miksa 1983, 124). Ironically, the work which began as an effort to decrease complexity and increase efficiency became a work of complexity by today's standards; however, Cutter's work can be appreciated for its innovative usage of subject headings further developed by the Library of Congress.

The lasting elements of the *Expansive Classification* exist in Cutter's alphabetical-order, author tables, popularly known as the "Cutter tables." Cutter stressed the importance in standardizing author names and geographic place notations; not surprisingly, his author tables still serve as the model for catalogers in the correct construction of author names in an alphabetically-arranged, notation system. The Cutter tables allow for the arrangement of books

by author under a given class. His first working model, suitable for a small library, consisted of two, simple tables comprised of consonants in the alphabet without the letter 'S,' followed by a table with the first letters of vowels in the alphabet with the letter 'S' using an alpha-numeric system. Librarian, Kate Sanborn compiled her own tables, modeled and expanded after Cutter's two-figure tables, but not based on his system. She developed a table for consonants in 1892 and one for vowels in 1895 altogether comprising three tables otherwise known as the Cutter-Sanborn tables. Although Sanborn attempted to construct a better and more efficient model of Cutter's tables, Sanborn's tables contain different alpha-numeric combinations that can't be used in conjunction with Cutter tables. Thus from 1899-1901, Cutter expanded his two tables into a three-table system widely in use today (*Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. "Cutter, Charles Ammi"). His widely accepted style in cataloging has denoted any practice of alpha-numeric notation as "Cutting" and such alpha-numeric notation as "Cutter numbers." Cutter imparted his name in lasting recognition of his noted accomplishments in the cataloging field; however in many respects, librarians owe much appreciation to Cutter for the lasting effects of his activism in the field of library science and for the library profession.

Cutter became the only participant to attend all ALA conventions from the first annual American Library Association (ALA) of 100 attending librarians in 1876, according to Thomas Hale Williams, librarian at the Minneapolis Athenaeum writing to the Commissioner of Education in 1875. For Cutter, these conventions became a platform to present lectures, initiate active discussions, and organize meetings on a few occasions. As head of the cataloging section, Cutter initiated discussions on relative issues central to the cataloging practice; as head of the ALA for two years in 1888 and 1889 he arranged meetings, prepared committee reports, and presented lectures on core subjects related to the profession. He also headed the Executive Committee and Cooperation Committee in ALA managing the administrative operations of the organization. At the 1889 convention, Cutter delivered an address on the "Common Sense in Libraries" regarding the sensible issues necessary for the improvement of library management such as hiring practices, collection development, and cataloging (Miksa 1977, 99-105). In addition to his involvement in ALA, Cutter also served as General Editor of the *Library Journal* from 1881-1893 contributing many articles on library science, library management, and cataloging issues at the time. He also supported library education, helping found American

Library Education (ALE) and strongly backed Dewey's development of the New York Library School where he later taught classes.

While Cutter garnered much praise and accolades over his many cataloging contributions, advocacy in access rights, and years of dedication to the field of librarianship, others grew critical and envious of his greatest achievements. Competing classification systems by both Melvil Dewey and Cutter led to heated arguments regarding the usability of the catalog and efficiency in the subject class systems. Having tried Dewey's system, Cutter exclaimed, "I did not like (and I still do not like Mr. Dewey's classification)." He preferred a system utilizing the 26 letters of the alphabet rather than Dewey's "cabalistic" ten-numeral notation (Cutter 1931, 41). Cutter exercised tight control over the ALA during this time and also succeeded Dewey as editor of the *Library Journal*. Dewey withdrew from membership in the ALA heavily criticizing the leadership of the ALA and a need for a simpler system than the current systems (Cutter's) in place for librarians. As a prolific writer, Cutter sought to effect change in policy and methodology although change did not bode well for everyone. In one of his many articles titled, "Pernicious Reading in our Public Libraries," Cutter addressed the topic of censorship facing libraries at the time regarding the restrictive acquisition of fiction books by trustees. He wrote:

First there are disgusting books, which everybody would exclude, as everyone would consent that the sale of poisons and drugged whiskey should be placed under restriction; then there are the doubtful books, ranging ... from brandy to lager-beer, about the prohibition of which there is every variety of opinion; and, finally, there are the unobjectionable novels – cream; milk, and milk and water – which trustee can supply without any qualms of conscience. (He may have doubts about the last, but we believe he will find infant stomachs that cannot endure anything stronger.) (Miksa 1977, 117)

The respected and revered members of the library board and Boston aristocracy at the Boston Athenaeum resisted the integration of change in its old organizational structure. He brought the Athenaeum library up to par with modern standards in its cataloging, circulation, acquisition, rich collection, and use by the public of all ages; however, the new administration became unwilling to listen and make future amendments to library policy, criticizing Cutter on his role as librarian. In refusing to implement new changes in the acquisition or the circulation of materials and tired of criticism over his management in ALA and from Dewey, Cutter left the Boston Athenaeum in 1893 for the small Forbes Library where he felt he could make a more positive difference (Cutter 1931, 32). He also took frequent trips with his wife, Sarah Fayerweather Appleton, to France to escape the library scene in America. Unfortunately although Cutter made

positive improvements at the Forbes Library, he never could finish the implementation of a newly, revised catalog system. Upon returning to work from his trip in France, he had another relapse of pneumonia and quietly passed away in 1903. Although Cutter acquired many friendships in his activities as a ballroom dancer and avid adventurer in hiking and camping trips detailed in letters from his friends, he achieved his greatest success until the last years of his life from his lifelong pursuit and active involvement in cataloging and librarianship.

## References

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Books on and by Charles Ammi Cutter mainly offer insight into Cutter's work as a cataloger, but also include a biographical account of his entire life. Henry Bliss analyzes the problems, principles, and structure associated with classification in libraries in addition to the nature of subject-cataloging and bibliography, providing criticism of historic classification systems. In this concentration on cataloging systems, Bliss discusses and critiques the historical significance of Charles Cutter's classification system with a central focus on Cutter's "Expansive" Classification System. Charles Cutter's manual attempts to structure the library catalog through implementation of his standard bibliographic practices. The dictionary catalog in its coverage includes a glossary of cataloging terminology and a comprehensive rule guide applicable to all library materials and publishing styles. William Parker Cutter, nephew of Charles Ammi Cutter, provides a narrative, historical account of the lineage of the Cutter family's roots in America beginning in 1640. Immroth recounts the historical developments in the catalog code from 1841 by examining different classification systems. The article presents an interesting perspective of pre-1876 cataloging philosophy versus the post-1876 perspective of user accessibility including Cutter's contribution to the cataloging practice. Francis Miksa's book presents a valuable source to those seeking a thorough history of Cutter's life and career as well as an understanding of Cutter's reflections on the library profession. Miksa offers a complete history of his family lineage, life history, and portions of his most popular works to provide an accurate and unbiased portrayal of this historical figure in library science. This extensive and detailed account of Cutter presents the librarian and cataloger as a pioneering idealist in areas of

library management, cataloging, library acquisition, and information science. Miksa's other book dissects the subject cataloging principles behind Charles Cutter's Dictionary Catalog and compares his subject cataloging structure to other classification systems. Miksa approaches this analysis from the perspective of catalogers familiar with the structures, terminology, and practices of subject cataloging. However, the analysis represents a more thorough evaluation and coverage of Cutter's noted subject-classification methodology than found in other sources.