

# [The Marine Biological Laboratory-Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution Library](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

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In 1888 when students and investigators arrived in [Woods Hole](#) <sup>[4]</sup> for the inaugural session of the [Marine Biological Laboratory](#) <sup>[5]</sup> (MBL), they recognized the need for a library collection of books and journals. The one wooden building on campus, later known as Old Main, housed everything, with researchers upstairs and the student laboratory downstairs. Lectures were held in one corner, and shelves held what books and journals were contributed. As the first MBL Director [Charles Otis Whitman](#) <sup>[6]</sup> noted in his 1888 [Annual Report](#) <sup>[7]</sup>, having a library was absolutely essential for the success of the lab and would have to be provided somehow. The initial core volumes should include reference works and textbooks, and also the important journals in the four languages thought to be essential at the time.

By the second year, Whitman's report expressed gratitude for the many contributions to the library. For Whitman, a "comprehensive biological library" would be the foundation on which a first rate laboratory would be built. Both research and instruction depend on such a resource. This early commitment to building a comprehensive journal collection as well as collecting the most important books has paid off, so that the library has been called a "national treasure" and has long been arguably the best complete and focused collection of life science journals available.

The vision for a great library was essential in attracting donations of funds to purchase journals and books, of course, but there were also other strategies for collecting. Visitors to the lab were invited to submit reprints and other research materials. When the MBL began publishing [The Biological Bulletin](#) <sup>[8]</sup> in 1899, they immediately established an exchange program with other journals and publishers. This exchange program was critical especially in the years of WWI and again in WW II, when few libraries had funds to purchase volumes and international cooperation was more challenging. Yet it was possible to continue publishing copies of their own publications and to exchange them later when regular mailings resumed. As a result, the MBL-WHOI (the [Woods Hole](#) <sup>[4]</sup> Oceanographic Institution) library has complete runs of most journals even when other libraries are missing those difficult years. When funds were available, the MBL purchased back issues to fill in incomplete runs and binding of individual issues into volumes became a priority very quickly (as mentioned in the fifth annual report). In 1895 Whitman urged that \$1000 per year was needed just to sustain the current level of library acquisition.

In the report for the years 1896–1899, [Cornelia Clapp](#) <sup>[9]</sup> provided the first official "Report on the Library." Clapp had been the first student to arrive at the lab in 1888 and had returned as an investigator; she also became the first woman trustee in 1910 and served in that role until her death in 1934. It is fitting that she served as first librarian, enthusiastically growing and protecting the collection that she also used. Though referred to as "[Miss Cornelia M. Clapp, Librarian](#) <sup>[10]</sup>," she held a PhD from Syracuse University in 1888 and another PhD from the [University of Chicago](#) <sup>[11]</sup>, where she worked with Whitman. In her first report she acknowledged the many gifts to the lab, including the accumulating files of papers contributed by lab researchers themselves. She appealed for more funds for purchasing and binding journals. This remained the theme for many years.

At first the library collection was housed in the shelves along one end of the wooden building. One year, many of the volumes seemed to have disappeared, but the next summer they were discovered tucked up into the roof, apparently for protection from storms though not successfully protected from all the [birds](#) <sup>[12]</sup>. As the collections continued to grow, they added to the demand for more space. Finally, when the first permanent brick building was constructed in 1914, the library had a safe and protected home. This building, funded by second MBL Director Frank Rattray Lillie's father-in-law [Charles Crane](#) <sup>[13]</sup>, and named the Crane Building, gave the MBL a way to demonstrate to all potential donors and supporters that the MBL intended to last forever and to make an impact with its research and teaching missions.

The library budget remained \$1000 a year, and despite its new secure home, collections depended very much on donations. Individuals donated money and books, journal exchanges expanded, and the librarians persuaded publishers to donate volumes that were then put on a New Book shelf as advertising, so that visiting scientists would go back home and have their institutional libraries buy them. In 1913 H. Mc. E. Kowner served as librarian and in his report strongly urged that the library needed an assistant to serve as a year-round librarian. Just having a volunteer scientist in the summer was not enough, since the collections were often left in a chaotic muddle of energetic use by the end of a season and there was nobody there during the rest of the year to straighten things out. Especially as the number of donated reprints grew, and as they received a great deal of use during the summer, it was considerable work just restoring the collection to order. Also, trying to keep on top of all the donations and exchanges during the summer alone was insufficient.

With a new building and library facility, it was time to hire a librarian. Miss [May E. Scott](#) <sup>[14]</sup> accepted the position and developed new catalogs, formally reaccessioned all the materials, and determined that the library had over 3300 volumes, plus about 1500

reprints. During the first year of her service, the library bound over five hundred volumes, replaced missing numbers, and added many more items. With a generous donation of over 2500 duplicates from the American Museum of Natural History, the library had achieved a new level of excellence.

Through the years, major donations have come at critical times from such groups and foundations as the [Carnegie Foundation](#)<sup>[15]</sup>, and the [General Education Board](#)<sup>[16]</sup> (\$10,000 in 1926), so that after a period of intense growth, by 1926 the library had already grown to 18, 220 volumes plus a carefully catalogued 38,000 reprints.

In 1924 the library moved to what became the five permanent stacks in the Lillie Building—a substantial brick building that extended the Crane laboratories. The building was constructed with major donations of well over one million dollars, especially from [Rockefeller Foundation](#)<sup>[17]</sup> and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. personally, Carnegie Corporation, and [Charles Crane](#)<sup>[13]</sup>. The tremendous collaborative success shows just how highly the MBL was regarded as a place of life science research and education.

After [Jane Fessenden](#)<sup>[18]</sup> became Librarian, the staff and collections grew considerably, as did their use. By the 1980s, it was becoming clear that the library was gathering a substantial collection, including some very valuable books and complete runs of journals that could not be replaced. The Rare Books Room and Archives opened in the 1980s after Cathy Norton took over as Librarian. The library moved to electronic publishing, with an emphasis on providing access for scientists in a way that successfully archives publications for continued use.

The Rare Books Room and Archives contain rare books, of course, a catalog of which is available to anyone since the MBL-WHOI Library is committed to making materials available for use rather than preserving them in ways that exclude legitimate scholarly access. There are some artifacts, including a few items from courses or Albert Szent-Gyorgyi's Nobel Prize for his work on vitamin C in Hungarian paprika peppers. The collection includes a few archival files, including some from [Frank Lillie](#)<sup>[19]</sup> that were transferred to the MBL from the [University of Chicago](#)<sup>[11]</sup>, as well as some notebooks, scrapbooks, and letters. And the collection has brought together valuable historical research materials into library exhibits, including the [Leuckart Charts](#)<sup>[20]</sup> and other [collections](#)<sup>[21]</sup>. In addition, the MBL is home to marvelous MBL Library Photograph Collections, featuring early photographs dating back to before the MBL was founded, a number of scrapbooks, and the wonderful [Alfred Frances Huettner Collection](#)<sup>[22]</sup>.

Today the library serves both the MBL and WHOI, based on a decision to combine resources to make an internationally leading library rather than to compete in the same small village of [Woods Hole](#)<sup>[4]</sup>. The MBL-WHOI library provides services for library researchers, some of whom draw mainly on the electronic journals, and Library Director Cathy Norton has become a leader in promoting bioinformatics and extending the use of the collections through networks of users.

As a result, one might be tempted to think that there is no reason to come to the actual MBL, since one can sit home and access modern journals on line. But this remains a vibrant place of science in the labs and in the courses. The library is a place where readers can find everything, pull it off the shelf, and see what else was going on in the same journal or at the same time. For at least the past decades, the MBL has seen a number of library readers who come precisely because they can find whatever they need “right there.” Recently, the library has added the formal category of Library Researcher, for those who come to spend a sabbatical, finish a major book project, or to collaborate with other scholars while using the library resources. The MBL-WHOI Library is very much an active place to find many kinds of wonderful materials but also a great place to find other people who know things and know where to find more materials. This place will never become obsolete because it is leading library information systems development, as through the [Encyclopedia of Life Project](#)<sup>[23]</sup> and the [Biodiversity Heritage Library](#)<sup>[24]</sup>. And this is also where the archival materials are housed and where scholars will find those materials and other scholars studying them.