

WELCOME FROM THE EDITORS

I would rather walk with a friend in the dark than walk alone in the light.

—Attributed to Helen Keller

Recently Bernadette was picking through the dollar bin at a favorite used bookstore when she came across a water-stained biography of Helen Keller, a pioneering advocate of people with disabilities.¹ In the final months of an incessantly gloomy year, perhaps reading about Keller would supply much-needed inspiration. Joseph P. Lash's 800-page work unveils much that the general public doesn't know about living as a deaf-blind person a century ago. Among many compelling stories is how Keller and her teacher, Anne Sullivan Macy, prepared for the question-and-answer portions of their appearances in lecture halls and on vaudeville stages. Lash uncovered lists of common questions and witty answers from which the "friend in the dark" quotation reprinted above probably originated. As explained by self-styled "Quote Investigator" Garson O'Toole, Keller was likely paraphrasing a saying that was popular among late nineteenth/early twentieth-century Christians and articulated their reliance upon God.² But the value of companionship during difficult times continues to resonate with us, both as members of a human family and as members of a professional/scholarly community.

When Americans are asked what they have missed or have enjoyed most over the past six to nine months, something relating to connections with other people is a common response. While a scholarly journal is more cognitively oriented and rather unisensory compared to other means of interpersonal interaction, *LCHS* performs valuable expressive and social functions in the sense that it offers voice and place, thereby drawing a library history community together. As *LCHS*'s editors, we happily dedicate time and energy to the journal because helping colleagues get published is just as rewarding (if not more so) than pursuing our own research.

Keller's words provide a fitting intellectual introduction to many of the articles in the current issue. This time, we open with Sarah Tucker's fascinating essay about a shelf list that either Julia Ward Howe or her daughter Maud Howe compiled of books, pamphlets, and periodicals that were contributed to the 1884–85 World Cotton Centennial's exhibit of women's publications.

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While Keller, born in 1880, was too young to have contributed anything to the display, it was Sullivan's finger-spelling of "W-A-T-E-R" as she poured cold water into Keller's hand that began the deaf-blind girl's journey of associating words with concepts and thus connecting her, via language, to a world that she couldn't hear or see. In a similar vein, at a time when many historians are struggling to obtain access to archival collections, Tucker shows how thought-provoking a single encounter with a physical item can be. Although her approach poses many questions that remain unanswered and thus is quite different from the argument-driven research studies that *LCHS* usually publishes, we feel that she points a way forward for those of us who do not presently have entrée to large collections of primary sources. Her article may also be of interest to practitioners who want to engage with a found historical artifact in a more thoughtful way. By introducing theoretical perspectives from the archival profession, Tucker also helps us identify common ground with colleagues whom we don't converse with as often as we should.

Other articles within this issue relate to themes of light and dark, solitude and communion. In their study of a Carnegie public library in Danville, Illinois, Alistair Black and Oriel Prizeman note the rapidly evolving nature of library architecture during the early twentieth century and how buildings that aligned with best practices when they were erected fell out of favor very shortly thereafter. In Danville's case, a Beaux Arts edifice that had been designed by experienced library architects was deemed "wasteful" by Carnegie secretary James Bertram just a few years later. As Black and Prizeman illustrate, negative attitudes established during this time of flux in professional opinion have filtered down to the present day, too often ignoring the pathbreaking nature and positive elements of early library designs. Black and Prizeman attempt—successfully, we believe—to help us understand the artistic, historical, and local contexts the Danville library existed within, thus bringing a maligned building into clearer perspective.

Next, we shift focus to Richmond, Virginia, and Alexandra Zukas's enlightening research on public library services for African Americans. As she notes, integration occurred relatively early (1947) and nonviolently, but these facts obscure the long campaign waged by Black residents as well as the ways in which the Richmond Public Library used registration, other policies and procedures, and branch library placement to discourage patrons of color from using the main library. In other words, white supremacy remained intact for many years after the city had declared the library open to all. Zukas's careful research also points out differing accounts in white and Black newspapers, an

important reminder that we cannot write comprehensive histories unless we include various viewpoints.

In her article on the American Heritage Project (AHP), Barbara A. Alvarez reprises a national, ALA- and Ford Foundation–sponsored discussion program of the 1950s that concretized ALA’s advocacy of intellectual freedom. As the opening section of Alvarez’s article shows, there were many prior examples of library programming pertaining to civics and democracy, but AHP was different in its emphasis on critical and independent thinking. AHP was also notable for its multiyear duration and its geographic spread, having established more than 1,000 discussion groups in more than thirty states by the mid-1950s. In addition to giving us an overall sense of the origins, operations, and impact of the project, Alvarez includes a case study of LaCrosse, Wisconsin, which includes many fascinating details. Reading her article at a time when many practicing librarians have had to suspend in-person events due to COVID-19 is a reminder of the rewarding, community-fostering activities libraries should return to when the pandemic is over.

The final research article in this issue examines the powerful results that can occur when distant people share their love of reading and view informational materials as conduits to a more equitable society. As Suzanne Stauffer explains, southern libraries that had existed for Black people during the mid-twentieth century often provided thin streams of castoff materials from white institutions. They were often of limited usefulness for community activists. In response, a federation of civil rights organizations established more than eighty “Freedom Libraries,” with about fifty located in Mississippi. Highlighting the Freedom Library in Vicksburg, Stauffer details how books, equipment, financial donations, and voluntary labor flowed from the Northeast and Midwest to the Deep South. Examining the case through the lenses of social dominance theory and identity theory, she also demonstrates how Freedom Library efforts empowered African Americans by circulating Black-authored materials; offering safe homework and recreational spaces for Black children; and, most important, encouraging Freedom Library users to demand their rightful privileges at segregated public libraries. Though Freedom Libraries ultimately made themselves redundant, they assisted (to use Stauffer’s words) in transforming both southern public libraries and the library profession from “hierarchy-enhancing” to hierarchy-attenuating institutions.

While all of this issue’s research articles focus on the United States, *LCHS* continues to welcome and promote the history of libraries and librarianship in other countries. Our book review section, edited by Brett Spencer, shares

works pertaining to early modern Europe, UNESCO, and book history across the globe.

As a final note, the importance of solidifying existing relationships and developing new ones is playing itself out in a very pressing way within the Library History Round Table, *LCHS*'s sponsoring organization. The American Library Association's "Forward Together" proposal has been filtering down to roundtable leaders and we are concerned that the proposed increase in membership thresholds could spell the end of small units like LHRT. So, what ALA calls "membership recruitment and engagement" is more important than ever. As current officers on LHRT's Executive Committee, we urge all *LCHS* readers who aren't already dues-paying members of ALA and LHRT to join us officially (see <http://www.ala.org/membership/joinala>). While we will always welcome contributions to *LCHS* and LHRT's blog from anyone in the library history community, the hard fact is that visible evidence of your interest, and the financial resources that your dues provide, are needed now and in the future in order for LHRT and *LCHS* to continue. Even the miracle of Zoom and social media can't provide everything that LHRT currently does!

Yours in community—

Bernadette A. Lear and Eric C. Novotny

NOTES

1. Joseph P. Lash, *Helen and Teacher: The Story of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan Macy* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1980).
2. Garson O'Toole, "I Would Rather Walk with a Friend in the Light than Alone in the Dark," *Quote Investigator*, May 13, 2013, <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/05/10/walk-with-friend/>.