

John Silva Meehan

(6 Feb 1790 – 24 Apr 1863)

Meehan. Suddenly in this city on the afternoon of the 24th inst., John Silva Meehan, Esq., aged 73 years. The funeral will take place on Sunday afternoon at 4 o'clock from his late residence south B street Capitol Hill to which his friends are respectfully invited.

The Evening Star, April 25, 1863, p. 2

Death of Mr. Meehan.

Yesterday afternoon, Mr. John Silva Meehan, ex-Librarian to Congress, died suddenly at his residence on south B street, Capitol Hill. Mr. Meehan was a native of New York, and had reached the advanced age of seventy-three years. In early life he was connected with the press, and at one time conducted a Democratic paper in the city, which was taken in charge by Duff Green when Mr. Meehan (during the first term of President Jackson) was appointed Librarian of Congress, which position he so acceptably filled for the space of thirty-three years. His funeral will take place from his late residence tomorrow afternoon.

The Evening Star, September 27, 1886

The old "Meehan" house facing the Capitol park on B street southeast has been purchased by Hon. W.M. Springer of Illinois who is having a modern front put in and the interior entirely remodelled for use as his private residence.

Source??, p. 355-357

Meehan, John Silva (1790-1863)

John Silva Meehan, printer, publisher, and Librarian of Congress, was born in New York City on February 6, 1790, and was educated there. He went to Burlington, New Jersey, in 1811 or 1812, to take part in the printing of Richard S. Coxe's *New Critical Pronouncing Dictionary of the English Language*, but in January 1815 was back in New York City, where he was warranted as a midshipman in the United States Navy. Assigned to serve aboard the Brig *Firefly*, he remained with that vessel until April, the restoration of peace with Great Britain having thwarted plans to cruise in the West Indies in pursuit of enemy commerce. He was offered a commission in the Marine Corps but chose to take up printing again and moved to Philadelphia. There, with Robert Anderson, Meehan began publishing a Baptist journal in 1818. After moving to Washington in 1822, the two began publishing a weekly newspaper, *The Columbian Star*, also under Baptist auspices.

In 1826, Meehan turned to the publication of a political journal and acquired the *Washington Gazette*. Renamed *The United States' Telegraph*, the newspaper was friendly to Andrew Jackson and John C. Calhoun. However, it soon became apparent that Meehan was not mounting the desired type of attack against the Adams administration, and the *Telegraph* was taken over by the dynamic and forceful Duff Green. After leaving the *Telegraph*, Meehan served for a time as secretary of the Board of Trustees of Columbian College. He is also said to have continued his support during this period for the election of Jackson in 1828.

On May 28, 1829, Meehan was appointed by Jackson as the fourth Librarian of Congress. Eminently acceptable on the score of his past political loyalty, he was nevertheless careful throughout his long

incumbency to avoid partisan activity. George Watterston (q.v.), whom he replaced, had been less so, and resorted unsuccessfully to a press campaign to set aside Meehan's appointment. For years thereafter, Watterston used threats, cajolery, and flattery in vain attempts to regain his former position.

Meehan was 39 years old when he became Librarian. He was 5 feet 7 inches tall, had brown hair, brown eyes, and a complexion tending toward the florid. By most accounts he was amiable, gentlemanly, precise, anxious to be of service, and a good businessman. The Library that he took over occupied the greater part of the central portion of the western front of the United States Capitol. Some 16,000 volumes reposed there, carefully arranged on shelves in the Library's alcoves according to the classification scheme inherited from Thomas Jefferson (q.v.). Meehan began his career in the Library with one assistant and gradually increased his staff to five, including his son, Charles Henry Wharton Meehan, who later was placed in charge of the Library's law department. The Librarian's salary was \$1,500 in 1829 and eventually rose to \$2,160. During Meehan's last year the Library (1861), the total appropriation was \$17,000.

Two opportunities were presented, in 1836 and 1844, which, if acted upon, would have set the Library of Congress upon a course toward becoming the first library of the land. The first of these involved an offer to purchase the library, famed throughout Europe, of Count Dimitrii Petrovich Buturlin. The price for this unique collection, consisting of 25,000 volumes and a number of valuable manuscripts, was in the range of \$50,000 to \$60,000, well below its true value. Although the support of the Joint Committee on the Library was given, a resolution favorable to the purchase of the Buturlin Library was rejected on the floor of the Senate. The loss of the Buturlin Library also had the effect of serving as a precedent for the rejection in 1844 of an offer to purchase the 10,000-volume library of the Durazzo family in Italy, considered one of the choicest private libraries in Europe. For all practical purposes, notice had been given that the Library of Congress was to remain a legislative library and that proponents of a national library would have to look elsewhere.

Meehan appears to have played no role in the attempt to acquire these two collections. This passivity was in keeping with his view of the Librarian as a creature of Congress, whose bidding he was always careful to do. Meehan's most significant encounters, understandably, were with the members of the Joint Committee and particularly with its chairman. In 1845, at a time when the Library was described in a guide book as consisting of "about forty thousand volumes, in a large and elegant room, and disposed in order by an excellent librarian," Senator James Alfred Pearce of Maryland came to the Committee. An era of extraordinarily close collaboration between Pearce and Meehan was thereby inaugurated, although there was never any question of the deferential nature of this relationship. Pearce, in fact, must thenceforth be considered as the dominant figure in Library affairs.

The legislation establishing the Smithsonian Institution in 1846 contained an interesting provision relating to federal copyright law that had the potential of greatly enriching the Library's collections. According to this provision, one copy of each book, map, chart, musical composition, print, cut, or engraving produced in the United States was to be placed in the Library of Congress. However, the implementation of this grand scheme for building national library resources was hindered by practical difficulties and impeded by differences of opinion. The legislation itself was faulty because it failed to provide Meehan with any means of compelling copyright deposits to be made, and, furthermore, the actual validity of a copyright did not appear to depend on a deposit. Meehan, who had many routine duties to perform and who found the processing of copyright deposits burdensome, did what was expected of him but was otherwise unenterprising. In 1859, the copyright provision, insofar as it involved the Library of Congress, was repealed.

The most dramatic event of Librarian Meehan's long incumbency occurred on December 24, 1851. Sometime before 8 o'clock on that morning, the Library Room was reported to be on fire, and in a few hours' time it was almost totally destroyed. An estimated 35,000 volumes were lost, including two-thirds of Jefferson's library; some 20,000 volumes, many of which were housed in adjoining rooms, were

saved. A few buckets of water would have been enough to extinguish the flames at the outset, but the rapid and extensive spread of the fire soon carried the situation beyond all control. No blame was ever attached to Meehan for the catastrophe, and plans were made almost immediately for the reconstruction of the Library Room and the acquisition of the books to stock it. Congress responded in both instances, voting special appropriations that eventually amounted to \$85,000 for the purchase of books and \$93,000 for the restoration of the Library Room. On July 6, 1853, Meehan took formal possession of the restored Library, thought by some to be one of the most beautiful rooms in the world. Meehan was preoccupied over the next few years with replacing the lost books, but for the most part, he moved cautiously, relying upon the Library's earlier catalogs in preparing his want lists, and dealing almost exclusively with the firm of Rich Brothers in London. Some opportunities were presented for enlarging the Librarian's powers at this time, but Meehan preferred to follow the more modest tradition of working closely within the framework of the Library Committee. As a result of the special appropriations of 1852 and annual appropriations of \$5,000 thereafter, the Library grew rapidly in the years after the fire, and in April 1856, Meehan was able to announce to Senator Pearce that 36,000 volumes from those catalog-based want lists had been purchased and that the losses had been entirely made good.

The international exchange of duplicate library materials as a means of enlarging and enhancing the collections of the Library of Congress was first promoted before Congress in 1840. The idea originated with Alexandre Vattemare (q.v.), a French citizen who had already achieved some success with this form of cooperation in Europe. He found favor with Congress, and Meehan was authorized to participate. However, the Librarian, who held a low opinion of Vattemare and believed in more traditional channels of acquisition, did not actively prosecute the international exchange program. Vattemare returned to the United States in 1848 and broached more ambitious plans, for which he again received congressional approval. The program now began to show some results, but growing distrust of Vattemare (not only by Meehan but by other American librarians and by French officials as well) and the poor quality of some of the materials received through Vattemare's agency led in 1853 to the abandonment of the exchange program.

Four printed catalogs of the contents of the Library were prepared by Meehan and his staff--in 1830 (258p.), 1839 (747p.), 1849 (1022p.), and 1861 (1398p.). A number of supplementary catalogs issued in intervening years tended to add to the cumbersomeness of a system based on the increasingly outmoded Jeffersonian classifications. Although Meehan never undertook it himself, one attempt was made at the Library of Congress in 1853 to carry out a wholesale reformation of cataloging through the preparation of stereotype plates for titles of the volumes in the Library. The brainchild of Charles C. Jewett (q.v.), librarian of the Smithsonian Institution, this system, by eventually taking account of the catalogs of other libraries, was promoted as a means toward central, uniform cataloging. Appropriations failed, however, and Jewett, who had continued to guide the stereotyping program, was dismissed from the Smithsonian in 1854. Lacking such essential support, the program soon faltered and came to a close.

Meehan experienced few serious threats of removal during his many years as Librarian. It had been his practice to remain cautiously non-political throughout his public life, and he had his record of survival to show how successful he had been. With the election of Lincoln in 1860, however, Meehan found himself in a difficult position. Senator Pearce, with whom he was so closely identified, had left the Whig party in 1856 to become a National Democrat. Although Pearce was a Unionist, he was also a Marylander, representing a state that was generally pro-Southern, and he found himself unable to declare boldly and clearly for the Union. As far as the Library of Congress was concerned, this meant a diminution of the chairman's influence. As far as John Silva Meehan was concerned, it meant the end of his long career. Although there were rumors of pro-Southern sympathies on the part of Meehan, no evidence exists to this effect. Ainsworth Rand Spofford (q.v.) later was to say that Meehan had been

removed only because he was "a very ancient fossil." Senator Pearce tried to intervene with Lincoln in Meehan's behalf, but to no avail, and John G. Stephenson (q.v.), an Indiana physician, replaced him on May 24, 1861. Meehan took his dismissal calmly and without rancor.

His retirement was not entirely untroubled, for his successor prepared an elaborate report for the Joint Committee detailing the shortcomings of the Library. Beyond the criticism leveled at him at the conclusion of his almost 32-year administration, some has followed him throughout the years, based on the broad grounds that Meehan and those others who had influence and authority in Library matters were willing to settle for too little. The history of the Library over the period 1829-1861 appears to be a chronicle of lost opportunities, opportunities for the enhancement of the Library through international and domestic exchanges, through the vigorous observance of copyright provisions, through timely special purchases, and by other means as well. Vision, imagination, and vigor seemed to be lacking, particularly concerning matters that by their very nature would have placed the Library on the road to becoming a true national library. Yet, given the reality of the situation which involved the general apathy of Congress where Library affairs were concerned and which must take account of the measured manner in which the powerful Senator Pearce controlled the Library, it is not so surprising that it was, and remained, a legislative library, the kind of library that Congress wanted.

Meehan survived in retirement for approximately two years, dying of apoplexy at his home on Capitol Hill on April 24, 1863. An obituary noted that "he was remarkably punctual and assiduous in his duties, unobtrusive, moral, and domestic in his habits, and of sterling integrity as a man." He had been married twice, first in 1814 to Margaret Jones Monington, who died in 1826, shortly after the birth of their seventh child; and then to his wife's sister, Rachel T. Monington, in October 1827. Rachel bore him two children. Only three of Meehan's children are known to have survived him.

Biographical listings and obituaries--National Cyclopaedia of American Biography 13. Books and articles about the biography--Cole, John Y., Jr. "Ainsworth Spofford and the National Library." Unpublished dissertation, George Washington University, 1971; Johnston, William Dawson. History of the Library of Congress, 1800-1864. Washington, 1904; McDonough, John., "John Silva Meehan" Quarterly Journal 33, No. 1:3-28 (Jan. 1976); Mearns, David C., The Story up to Now: The Library of Congress, 1800-1946. Washington, 1947. Primary sources and archival materials--John Silva Meehan Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; Librarian's Letterbooks, Library of Congress Archives, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

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