George Watterston

(23 Oct 1783 – 4 Feb 1854)

Paul Pry, June, 1833

Besides all this, expense to indemnify George Watterston, Esq. for being turned out of the Library,

for all we have gained, he might as well have staid in--it was only swapping one Blueskin for another, some thousand volumes of Statistics have been subscribed for by Congress, paid to Watterston and Vanzant, which, in all probability the people will never see, though they have paid roundly for them; they are of no more value to them than oak leaves. Congress has also subscribed for a number of books to St. Clair Clark, and P. Force, how many thousand we know not--and again, for another thousand or two to Mr. Jonathan Elliot--and there is no doubt but of a dozen or twenty dozen of sharpers apply to our very generous Congress, particularly Blueskins, thousands of the people's money would be granted to them. What right has Congress to give money for trash; and so much of it to put into the Library--how does this trash benefit the people? So we go, and the people tacitly consenting.

We are called on to attend to Congress-to watch the government--we do so; we apprize the people; and what does it avail, nothing. We published a very spirited exposure of the Pension office and some of Secretary Cass' temperance prayers, last Session, written by Col. Blunt of N.C. This did much good. The public ought to express their disapprobation of this waste of their money (and upon such objects too!) by public meetings.

The National Intelligencer, Monday, February 6, 1854

On Saturday morning last, at his residence on Capitol Hill, George Watterston, Esq., one of the oldest and most esteemed citizens of Washington. A witness in early childhood to the laying of the corner-stone of the Capitol, he manifested throughout his life a constant devotion to the interests of the National Metropolis. To his early and untiring labors, pursued through all vicissitudes, may be mainly ascribed the success of the great enterprise of erecting in this city the Monument to the memory of the Father of his Country by the contributions of the People, and with that proud memorial of a Nation's gratitude his name is indissoluble associated. Honored by various public trusts, he discharged them all with ability, and in all displayed the same strict integrity, diligence, and loyalty to duty which marked his character in private life. He was also distinguished for his love of letters, as manifested by his frequent compositions on moral, political, and literary subjects. Though ardent in temperament, he was modest and unobtrusive in manner. His sterling merits were most highly estimated by those who had longest known him; and during his mortal illness, protracted for nearly six weeks, the universal and deep anxiety of his neighbors was a tribute to his character which cannot be mistaken.

The Funeral will take place this afternoon, from his late residence on Capitol Hill, at 3 o'clock. The friends of the family are requested to attend, without further notice.

The Evening Star, February 6, 1854

Obituary

Mr. George Watterston, a well known citizen of Washington, who had held several prominent situations, having been for many years a member of the City Councils, and librarian of the Congressional Library, died on Saturday last, at the residence on Capitol Hill. At the time of his death, he was secretary to the Washington National Monument Society.

The National Intelligencer, February 7, 1854

The Late George Watterston

Washington Monument Office, February 6, 1854

At an extra meeting of the Board of Managers, held this day, the following resolutions were unanimously adopted:

Resolved, That the Board of Managers have heard with deep regret the decease of George Watterston, Esq., an ever assiduous and valuable member of this Board, the chief originator of the noble scheme of a National Monument to the Father of his Country, and the able and faithful Secretary of the association from its formation to the day of his death.

Resolved, That the Board of Managers sympathize most sincerely with the family of their deceased fellow-member on the severe bereavement which they have suffered.

Resolved, That the Board will attend the funeral of the deceased this day at 3 o'clock p.m.

Resolved, That, as a mark of respect for the memory of the deceased member, the office of the Board be draped in mourning for the space of thirty days; and, further, that all work on the Monument be suspended during this day.

Resolved, That the Chairman communicate to the family of the deceased a copy of the foregoing resolutions.

A. Henderson, Chairman.

F.G. Eckloff, Secretary.

The Evening Star, February 7, 1854

Funeral.

The funeral of Mr. Watterston took place yesterday afternoon, under the charge of Mr. J.F. Harvey, and was attended by a large concourse of citizens. The Mayor, Hon. K. Whittlesey, Gen. Henderson, P.H. Fendall, Esq., Gen. Weightman, R. Deule, Thomas Blagden and Robert Brown acted as pall bearers and five of the workmen belonging to the Washington Monument, the deceased having been Secretary of the Association, walked on each side of the hearse. The flag on the building was likewise lowered half-mast high as a token of respect. The funeral services were performed, by the Rev. Mr. Sunderland and the Rev. Dr. Gurley.

Dictionary of American Library Biography

Watterston, George (1783-1854)

The first full-time Librarian of Congress was born aboard a ship in New York harbor on October 23, 1783. George Watterston was the son of David Watterston, an emigrant master-builder who had left Jedburgh, Scotland, with his family in order to start a new life in New York City. Eight years later, lured by the opportunities afforded by the creation of the new federal city, the elder Watterston moved with his family to Washington, D.C. Young George was sent to school at Charlotte Hall in St. Mary's County, Maryland, where he received a good classical education. He was then attracted to the study of law, and later opened a law office in Hagerstown, Maryland. Law was not for him, however, for he soon began a literary career that continued throughout his life.

His growing distaste for the legal profession became apparent in his first novel, "The Lawyer, or Man as He Ought Not to Be" (1808), a psychological study of a thoroughly despicable character. He touched on a l lighter theme for his next work, "The Child of Feeling: A Comedy in Five Acts (1809) which was followed closely by a second novel, "Glencarn: or The Disappointments of Youth" (1810). The death of a rich uncle gave him an excuse to close his law office and travel to the West Indies to view his inheritance. He kept a journal of the trip and drew upon his experiences for his next literary endeavor, a poem entitled, "The Wanderer in Jamaica" (1810), which he prefaced with a dedication to Dolley Madison, wife of the President, as follows: "Madam, I have presumed to address this poetical effusion to you from the reputation you have acquired of being desirous to promote the cause of general literature." Upon returning from his travels, Watterston opened a law office in Washington with Thomas Law. On October 26, 1811, he married Maria Shanley and established a home on Capitol Hill. They had eight children.

The 29-year-old Watterston, now an established inhabitant of the new District of Columbia, soon began his involvement with the political and social life of the city of his childhood; as a result, he soon became one of Washington's first civic and cultural leaders. In 1812, he became a candidate for the position of collector of the District of Columbia. The next year he was engaged as the editor of the "Washington City Gazette," a Republican paper, the first of four newspaper editorships he was to hold throughout his life. The war with England raged around the city, and, in 1814, Watterston marched with Captain Benjamin Burch's company to meet the British at nearby Bladensburg. He returned to the city to find his own house pillaged, the nearby Capitol in ruins, and, of future importance to him the fledgling Library of Congress within the Capitol building destroyed.

Prior to 1815, the clerk of the House of Representatives had the additional responsibility of caring for the Library of Congress. Patrick Magruder (q.v.), clerk of the House at that time, was discredited by those who thought he should have done something to save the Library before its destruction during the British occupation of the city. Because of the ill feeling that arose over this event, Magruder resigned his position on January 28, 1815. As a further consequence, it was determined that the position of Librarian should be distinct from the office of clerk of the House. Accordingly, on March 21, 1815, President Madison appointed George Watterston as the first full-time Librarian of Congress. While the legend persists that the dedication of his poem to Dolley Madison was responsible, the real reason was probably Watterston's unique position as Washington's only man of letters.

Watterston pursued his new duties with vigor. Indeed, he was responsible for all of the work in the Library, with the exception of the selection of materials, a pleasure reserved for the Joint Library Committee. Not until 1827 was he officially allowed to hire an assistant. Yet he approached his job with imagination and a vision as to what the Library should become, a vision that frequently clashed with the more practical realities posited by the Library Committee. His first job was to receive and arrange the library of Thomas Jefferson (q.v.), purchased in early 1815. The Library had been moved to temporary quarters in Blodgett's Hotel, where Watterston arranged the wooden packing cases containing the Jefferson collection and began work on a catalog. On April 26, 1815, he wrote to Jefferson asking for the former President's system of arrangement," which was based on the 44 "chapters" comprising Francis Bacon's table of knowledge. The Librarian decided to adopt the system in general, although he modified it by alphabetizing the books within chapters, rather than using the analytical or chronological subdivisions that Jefferson had devised.

In October 1815, Watterston's "Catalogue of the Library of the United States" went to press, with copies delivered to the Library Committee prior to December 4. Jefferson, when queried by the anxious Librarian as to how he liked the new arrangement within the chapters, replied mildly in a letter dated march 2, 1816, "Of course, you know, not so well as my own, yet I think it … may be more convenient to readers generally than mine…" But the Library Committee members were distinctly unhappy. They did not consider the catalog to be of particular use to the members of Congress and, in their report of

January 26, 1816, complained about its cost—a grand total of $1360.50 for 600 copies, "one third more than the annual appropriation made heretofore by Congress for the additional increase of the library, and more than one twentieth of the actual cost of our whole library." Despite the Committee's attitude, Jefferson's classification system as adapted by Watterston was used by the Library of Congress for the rest of the century.

The controversial title of the "Catalogue" was not mentioned in the Committee's report. Nevertheless, it does illustrate that Watterston wanted the Library to be more than just Congress's personal possession. Indeed, despite the Committee's concern with the "miscellanies" of the current collection, Watterston inserted a "Card" into the September 15, ,1815, issue of "The National Intelligencer" asking "that American authors, engravers, and painters who are solicitous to preserve their respective productions as mementos of the taste of the times, would transit to the Library a copy of such work as they may design for the public eye …" The letter was issued from the "Library of the United States" and signed "George Watterston, Librarian of Congress." Later Librarians, of course, expanded upon Watterston's early ambitious attempts to build a truly national collection, in addition to a separate building. For on March 25, 1817, another letter written by the persistent Librarian argued for a new building for "the Library of the United States," the first of such dreams to haunt successive Librarians.

Watterston's desire for a building was thwarted, however, for on December 3, 1818, an act was approved that moved the Library to the north wing of the reconstructed Capitol. These quarters proved to be inadequate, and, in 1824, the Library was again moved, this time to the center reported in "The National Intelligencer (August 28, 1823) to be "the most delightful part of the building, commanding a fascinating view of the most populous part of our city, and of the whole length of the Avenue that connects it with the other Public Offices, and the President's House." Fire was again to prove the Library's nemesis, however; on December 22, 1825, a blaze occurred that fortunately was quickly extinguished. The loss was not heavy, and nothing of consequence was destroyed; but Watterston urged that suitable precautions be taken to make the Library fireproof. Despite an official inquiry into the matter, no steps were taken. The Librarian's worst fears were later confirmed when, in 1851, fire again broke out, this time destroying two-thirds of the collection, including most of Jefferson's library.

Watterston's duties as Librarian did not deter his literary endeavors. Although he became more of an interpreter, critic, and journalist than an imaginative writer after his appointment, he did publish two more novels, which some critics think to be his most important creative works. In both "The L--- Family in Washington; or a Winter in the Metropolis" (1822) and "The Wanderer in Washington" (1827), Watterston used Washington society for his setting, the first writer of fiction to do so. His interests were wide, and he contributed journalistic pieces to local papers on a variety of topics, including landscape gardening, local and national politics, music, education, and horticulture. In 1816, he became one of the founders of the Washington Botanical Society and, a year later, published a pamphlet on the history, culture, and uses of tobacco. Politics always intrigued him, and in the same year he assumed the editorship of a political paper (the "National Register") for a time. Under his direction, the "splendid rooms" of the Library became a literary salon, where the leading men and women of letters gathered to read and discuss issues of the day. His critical pieces concerning his contemporaries were surprisingly accurate. At the same time, the Library received increasing support, mainly through the efforts of the Library Committee; on May 26, 1826, Congress raised the book budget to $5,000, a sum granted annually for many decades thereafter.

While his "boosting" of Washington brought him great local prominence, his avid participation in politics proved his downfall. In 1827, he began writing regularly for the "National Journal," turning it into an organ for the Whig cause. His support of the Whigs and Henry Clay had continued unabated since 1818, when he published his "Letters from Washington, on the Constitution, Laws, and Public Characters of the United States." Democratic President Andrew Jackson had no use for him in his new

government and summarily dismissed him on May 28, 1829. Watterston was indignant. He stomped out of the Library carrying the record books with him. For the rest of his life, he attempted to regain his appointment, but it was a fruitless effort, even though the Whigs won the presidency twice in the next fifteen years. He finally expressed his contempt for the situation in 1850, when he rejected his party and became a Democrat.

Watterston's notorious contemporary, Anne Royall, newspaperwoman and fellow writer, "was much struck with his gentlemanly appearance and manners." In her eyes Watterston appeared as: "a man of good size, neither spare nor robust; he is a fine figure and possessed of some personal beauty; his complexion fair, his countenance striking, shows genius and deep penetration, marked with gravity, though manly and commanding. A sweet serenity diffuses itself over his countenance, which no accident can ruffle; and under the veil of retiring modesty, discovers his blushing honors thick upon him."

He was charming and loyal to his friends, a realist who had to support himself largely by his writings. He had a happy home life, and maintained an affectionate interest in the activities of his children long after they had grown. Yet his behavior during the years he attempted to regain his position demonstrated that he was think-skinned, outspoken to the point of being abusive, and filled—as historian David Mearns aptly described in "The Story Up to Now"—with a "sense of superiority" that caused him to become deeply embittered. Despite his futile attempts to regain his former job, he maintained a comfortable position and continued in his efforts to give Washington a place in the literature of the day. His success in this endeavor became apparent when "The Southern Literary Messenger," to which Watterston had contributed many articles, dubbed him the "Metropolitan Author" after the appearance of the second of his Washington guidebooks, "A New Guide to Washington" (1842). ("A Picture of Washington" had appeared in 1840.)

In 1830, Watterston became the editor of the "National Journal." Three years later, he began the movement to build the Washington Monument and remained as secretary of the Washington National Monument Society until his death, which occurred on February 4, 1854. Little mention was made of his passing. A notice of his death that appeared in "The National Intelligencer" on February 6, 1854, ironically made no mention of his years as Librarian and passed quickly over the literary achievements. Instead, it concentrated almost entirely on his activities with the Monument Society.

Although he is almost entirely forgotten now, George Watterston, the first full-time Librarian of Congress, had a definite impact on the Library during his fourteen-year tenure. Starting with 6,500 volumes in 1815, the Library contained 15,000 volumes in 1829, placing it fourth among libraries in the United States. The book budget was increased from $1,000 to $5,000 to be provided on an annual basis. The Library had become a leading literary center in the new federal city, which was still trying to prove itself. Most important, perhaps, is the fact that George Watterston was the first of a number of distinguished Librarians who envisaged the Library of Congress as a national repository for American cultural history and have sought ever since to reach that objective.

Biographical listings and obituaries:

1. Appletons' Cyclopedia of American Biography, Vol 6
2. Dictionary of American Biography, Vol 19 (Frederick William Ashley)
3. National Cyclopedia of American Biography, Vol 7
4. Obituary, "Daily Union,," Washington, D.C., Feb. 7, 1854
5. Obituary, "The National Intelligencer," Washington, D.C., Feb. 6, 1854
6. Who Was Who in America, Historical Volume (1607-1896)
7. Johnston, William Dawson, "History of the Library of Congress," Washington: Government Printing Office, 1904

8. Kennedy, Julia E., "George Watterston Novelist, “Metropolitan Author,” and Critic", Washington: Catholic University of America, 1933
9. Matheson, William, "George Watterston, Advocate of the National Library," Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress 32:370-88 (Oct. 1976)
10. Mearns, David C., "The Story Up to Now," In "Annual Report of the Librarian of Congress," Washington: Government Printing Office, 1947
11. Royall, Anne N., "Sketches of History, Life, and Manners in the United States," New Haven, 1826
12. The Watterston Papers in the Library of Congress consist of three bound volumes of letters and memoranda and two small manuscript volumes.