

The First Book in the Library of The First State University

BY LOUIS R. WILSON

WHAT WAS THE FIRST BOOK acquired by the first state university library of America?¹ What university library received it? What were the circumstances under which it was acquired? Where is it today? The answers to these questions appear in the following pages.

The first three questions can be answered easily; the fourth calls for more extended consideration.

The answer to the first question may have been known as long ago as March 22, 1785. But if so, the information has not been generally available. Undoubtedly, Charles Thomson, the Secretary of the United States Congress at that time, knew which state university would probably receive the book, but the institution did not then actually exist except as it was provided for in a state constitution which had been adopted by a constitutional convention on December 18, 1776.

There was no uncertainty, however, about the first book that was to find its way into the library of the first state university to open its doors and send out into the life of the nation the first class of graduates. It was a copy of the second edition of *The Works of the Right Reverend Father in God Thomas Wilson, D.D. Fifty-eight Years Lord Bishop of Sodor and Man. With his Life Compiled from Authentic Papers by the Rev^d. C. Cruttwell*. Published at Bath in 1782, it

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was printed by R. Cruttwell, and sold by C. Dilly, Poultry, London. Volume I contained various papers by Bishop Wilson as well as his biography, while volume II contained his sermons. The two volumes were bound as one in morocco, making a stout folio.

The Works of Bishop Wilson appeared in several editions and extracts were widely circulated. Possibly the most extensively distributed edition was the third in eight octavo volumes, also printed at Bath in 1782-89.

The library of the University of North Carolina was the fortunate institution to receive the book, even though in 1785 the University's establishment by the General Assembly was four years in the future.

The official record of the transactions relating to the acquisition of the first book consists of four parts:

I. Article XLI of the Constitution of North Carolina adopted at Halifax, North Carolina, December 18, 1776, constitutes the first part. It authorized the establishment of one or more universities thirteen years before the General Assembly of 1789 passed the enabling act which brought the University into being.

That a school or schools be estab-

¹This article is reprinted from *The Library of the First State University: A Review of Its Past and a Look at Its Future*, by Louis R. Wilson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1960). The publication was issued on the occasion of the addition of the millionth volume to the North Carolina collections.

lished by the Legislature, for the convenient instruction of Youth, with such Salaries to the Masters, paid by the Public, as may enable them to instruct at low prices: and all useful learning shall be duly encouraged and promoted in one or more Universities.

II. The second part is a copy of a resolution of the United States Congress passed on March 22nd, 1785, concerning the donation of copies of the *Works* of Bishop Wilson by his son, Dr. Thomas Wilson, to the Congress for distribution to the libraries of the college or universities of the respective states, the resolution being inscribed on the fly-leaf of the volume by the secretary. The information concerning the resolution is taken from *The Library of the University of North Carolina*, by Fisk P. Brewer, professor of Greek and librarian, 1860-70, and the resolution as it appears on the fly-leaf of the copy presented to Brown University.

By
The United States in Congress Assembled March 22, 1785.
On motion of Mr. Howell seconded by Mr. King,—

Resolved that the Delegates representing each of the United States in Congress assembled be, and they are hereby authorized to receive from the Secretary of the Congress and to transmit to such College, University or public Seminary of learning in their states respectively as they may judge proper, to be deposited in the Library thereof, one of the *Works* of Thomas Wilson, D.D., and late Bishop of Sodor and Man, presented to Congress by his Son Doctor Wilson, Prebendary of Westminster.—

CHAS. THOMSON, Secy.

No mention is made of the specific institutions to which the gifts were sent in the *Journal of the Continental Congress*,

1774-1789, volume XXVIII, page 188, where the resolution is recorded.

III. The third part is the statement of agreement made in 1785 by the delegates to the Congress from North Carolina who received the donation to transmit it to the University. The statement appeared on the fly-leaf following the resolution and is quoted by Brewer as follows:

In pursuance of the above resolution the undersigned, delegates from the State of North Carolina, have agreed to transmit the works of Dr. Thomas Wilson to Newberne, to be deposited there in the Library, belonging to the public Academy, till the time arrives, which they hope is not far distant, when the wisdom of the Legislature, according to the express intention of the Constitution shall have caused a College or University to be erected in the State.

HU. WILLIAMSON
JNO. SITGREAVES

IV. The fourth part is from the Minutes of the Board of Trustees of the University acknowledging the receipt and acceptance of the gift at their meeting in Newbern December 5, 1792, almost a year before the cornerstone of the first building of the University was laid.

A book entitled "The works of the right reverend Father in God Thomas Wilson D.D. Lord Bishop of Sodor and Man" was presented to the board by the Honle, John Sitgreaves Esqr agreeably to a resolution of the Congress of the United States passed March 22nd. 1785 which was accepted.

Two other manuscript notes appear in the copies received by other colleges and universities. The copy at Brown University carries on the otherwise blank page before the flyleaf the notes:

A Present of the Revd. Dr. Wil-

son, Prebendary of Westminster and Son of the Author, Bishop of Man to Congress.

The U. States in Congress assembled to the College in Providence in the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantation.

The two notes are in different handwritings and neither is signed. The note concerning the present by Dr. Wilson in the Dartmouth College copy is signed with initials which the reference librarian reports could be SL or LL, in script of 18th or 19th century style. The initials are evidently those of Samuel Livermore who was a delegate from New Hampshire in 1785.

The bookplate in the copy at Harvard carries the inscription "The Gift of the Congress of the United States Recorded 5 Sept. 1785," and information from several of the institutions is given concerning the dates on which the copies were received.

Up to this point, the record is clear and explicit. Librarian Brewer wrote about it in 1869-70; Dr. K. P. Battle, President of the University, 1876-91, and historian of the University, repeated the earlier statement of Brewer in Volume I of his *History of the University of North Carolina*, 1907, and R. D. W. Connor, Craige professor of history and jurisprudence, carried the story further in Volume I of his *Documentary History of the University of North Carolina*, 1953, citing the acknowledgement by the Board of Trustees at Newbern in December, 1792, of the receipt and acceptance of the donation transmitted by Jno. Sitgreaves.

The eventual fate of the "stout folio" can only be conjectured since no record of its actual presence in the library has appeared since 1869-70. In that respect, it shares the fate of the Sir Walter Raleigh Colony of 1587 on Roanoke Island, North Carolina, which John White left behind in August of that year while he

returned to England for supplies. On his return in 1590 he found no trace of it other than a few broken pieces of armor and the name CROATAN carved upon a tree. The whole colony, including Virginia Dare, the first child of English parents to be born in "Virginia," had disappeared behind a veil of mystery. In 1937, Paul Green gave the legend permanent artistic form in a moving dramatic symphony, *The Lost Colony*, performances of which have been attended annually in the seaside theatre at Fort Raleigh by thousands of delighted visitors.

Speculation as to when and how this first book was lost, however, points to the period immediately after Librarian Brewer wrote about it in 1869-70.

Although the University enrollment of 461 in 1858 was exceeded only by that of Yale, and the University had remained open during the Civil War, its president and faculty had been turned out by the Reconstruction government in June 1868 and replaced by a new President and hastily assembled faculty. A new governor and board of trustees were in command. This new Reconstruction faculty, placed in charge of the University in 1868-69, and characterized by Mrs. Cornelia Phillips Spencer as the "incomparable incapables," failed to inspire the confidence of North Carolina, few students appeared in 1868-69, and the commencement of 1869 was, to quote Mrs. Spencer again, "a grand fizzle." The "exercises" of the University were "largely suspended" and came to an end in 1869-70. The University was formally closed by the Trustees on February 1, 1871, and remained closed until September 1875. During this period the properties of the University deteriorated badly. It appears all the more likely that the volume disappeared at this time when one reads testimony from two individuals writing at the time—David S. Patrick, professor of latin and bursar of the University; and Mrs. Spencer, the principal correspondent of the state press

and commentator of the University during the period 1865-80.

The testimony of the Bursar is piquant and intriguing. In his report of November 12, 1869, he observed: "I have been informed that at the time of the suspension of exercises the opinion prevailed in Chapel Hill, that the University property belonged to the people. It is not surprising, therefore, that some laboring under this pleasing impression should have been guilty of theft. Books were taken from the libraries and all working utensils used about the college campus were stolen. Some have returned property with the request that 'no questions should be asked,' while others retained property under the impression that 'something may yet turn up.'"

Mrs. Spencer, to whom much of the credit for the reopening of the University in 1875 is given, bitterly criticized the unpopular Reconstruction administration in letters to friends and the state press for its neglect of the buildings and particularly for the despoliation of the libraries of the University and the Dialectic and Philanthropic literary societies in which she had long been particularly interested. In a letter to former Governor W. A. Graham, she vividly described the constant deterioration the buildings were undergoing. "These persons now in charge have but one motive in action—their own interests and how to make the most of their position. The last detachment of Governor Holden's troops broke in the Philanthropic library, defaced and carried off . . . valuable books. . . . You have doubtless heard of one of Mr. Pool's students, kicking out the doors of the Dialectic and Philanthropic Archives rooms and scattering the papers. A few more years of negro and white soldiery, and carpetbag and scalawag faculty rule and the property will indeed be past all necessity for oversight."

No mention was made of the volume when the three libraries of the societies

and the University were merged in 1886 to form the present university library, or in 1891 when the volumes in it and all other collections were counted and duplicates were listed and offered for sale, or in 1894-95 when a full-time librarian was employed and began to maintain accession and other library records and annual reports. And, from 1901 to 1910 when all the collections were reclassified and recatalogued, it was not included in the record of volumes in the section of the library devoted to philosophy and religion in which all books being reclassified were entered.

Another possible explanation might be found in a letter written in 1936 by the faculty librarian under whose direction the libraries of the University and the literary societies were merged in 1886, four years before he became a member of the faculty of another university. Writing fifty years after the event, he recalled that when the libraries were merged some of the old, little used books of the university library were stored for lack of space on the top floor of New East. But when the archives of the Philanthropic Society were transferred from New East to the Carnegie library building after 1907 and when the building was completely renovated and rearranged in the middle 1920's, the presence of these books was not recorded.

In this respect, its fate was unlike that of the copies received by the libraries of Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Brown, Columbia, the University of Pennsylvania, and Dartmouth. These have been preserved in their rare book collections. The Rutgers copy has disappeared if it was ever received.

The copy received by the College of William and Mary presents a problem which the librarian reports can be explained only by the fact that the College had been in communication with Bishop Wilson earlier than 1785. In July, 1744, President William Dawson of the College acknowledged the receipt of Bishop

Wilson's "Essay," and letters to and from the Bishop are included in the Dawson papers in the Library of Congress. The College received a copy of his *Works* in 1783, which it acknowledged on July 12, 1783, "At a meeting of the President and Professors of the University." It was a copy of the 1782 edition and was presented by the Bishop's son, but no reference could be made to the Congress since this gift was made earlier than those of 1785. Whatever the provenance of the gift was, the College no longer has the copy. It "did not survive the fire of February, 1859, or the destruction of the Library during the Peninsula Campaign."

Although the University of Georgia was chartered on January 27, 1785, fifty-four days before the resolution of the Congress was passed, that was probably too late for a copy to have been included in the gift for it. The information could hardly have been received in London before the books were dispatched to the Congress. At all events, its library has no record of ever having received a copy.

The University of Vermont poses an interesting question. It, like the University of North Carolina, was provided for in the Revolutionary Constitution adopted in 1777. It was chartered in 1791, and opened in 1800. But, unlike the University of North Carolina, it has no record of ever having received a copy of Bishop Wilson's *Works*.

The University of Pennsylvania has always been a private, non-sectarian institution except from 1779 to 1789 when the Legislature, under the influence of the Revolution, took over its control. However, the trustees protested vigorously the violation of the original charter and the institution was returned to its former status. It has received public grants, but without the assumption of state control.

Two other institutions than those named above were chartered before March 22nd, 1785. The College of Charleston was chartered March 19, 1785, three days before the resolution

was passed, but it has no record of having received a copy.

Washington College, of Chestertown, Maryland, was chartered in 1782. George Washington headed its list of endowment contributors, served on its first board of visitors, and was awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws in 1789. However, the College suffered the loss by fire of its first library in 1827 and of its second in 1917. Few early records of the institution remain. The minutes of the board of visitors do not go back of 1816 and there are no early faculty records. Whether a copy was ever received consequently is unknown.

Brown University received its copy through the Rhode Island delegates to the Congress. It also acquired through gift a second copy and both copies are included in a catalogue published in 1793. The second copy differs from the copies received through the Congress in that the two volumes are not bound in one. They are separately bound with the portrait of Bishop Wilson as the frontispiece of volume one. The binding is also different and unusual. The back strip is calf instead of morocco and the covers are overlaid with paper with a gilt border around the edge. This is fairly early for the use of paper in binding and is important historically.

As a result of an inquiry sent to the institutions mentioned concerning the imprint and physical characteristics of the original gifts, the authorities of the John Hay Library and Brown University very generously offered to present the two volumes to the library if it would accept them to replace the missing book number one in the University of North Carolina's Library. This splendid gift has been warmly accepted by the library and the University, and this instance there is the profound hope that when the second millionth volume is acquired these two volumes will still be preserved among the library's most treasured possessions.