
GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS AND THE PUBLIC LIBRARIAN.*

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A unique library exists in the Government Printing Office at Washington—a library composed exclusively of United States public documents and now comprising over 200,000 books. It is the most nearly complete collection extant of the documents published by authority of our Government. A complete collection of the early documents does not exist, nor is it known now with certainty what documents and reports were printed by the first fourteen congresses. To lack of foresight, perhaps, and the economies of inexperienced legislators, the vicissitudes of the young nation, and to destruction by fire of the earlier libraries gathered for the use of Congress—to all these causes the scarcity or complete disappearance of early documents may be attributed. As many as possible have been recovered and the collection is now sufficiently full to warrant the belief that nothing very important has been lost. Desultory efforts had been made from time to time to collect the public documents, but not until the office of Superintendent of Documents was created in 1895 did these efforts completely materialize. The nucleus of the public Documents Library was a miscellaneous mass of documents which had been accumulated in the Government Printing Office. This material was put in order, as were other lots obtained from time to time, provision was made for the addition of a copy of every future publication under Government authority, and the whole thoroughly and systematically catalogued. In this library are brought together the accounts of the labors of all the army of people who have been employed

* With the permission of the Director of the U. S. Geological Survey.

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to carry on the government's activities. Here are the results of the studies of all the thousands of trained investigators, all the explorers, all the workers on land and sea who have gone forth authorized to perform their varied duties and execute the many missions incident to the life of a great nation. These pages form the journal of a growing nation's life—intimate, self-recorded. They reveal its high hopes, its egotism, its mistakes and disappointments, its gropings toward wiser aims and higher standards. From these records may the historian of a far future decipher the history of a better civilization than the world has ever before known.

However, our intimate interest is not in this particular collection gathered in Washington, but rather in what composes it. The abundance of practical, helpful, facts here put down—facts intimately related to our daily life and necessary activities—should be at the ready service of the people. Here is an opportunity for the public librarian. Government document literature has been neglected in our public libraries while undue prominence is given to the merely recreational. The urgent need of a wider publicity for the educational and scientific works printed by the Government is apparent. To meet it, publishing officials are making definite efforts which should have the active and intelligent co-operation of public librarians.

As a first step a better acquaintance with public documents on the part of librarians is necessary—many librarians of the smaller communities are utterly uninformed in regard to the field they cover. To all these the enlightening little periodical, "Monthly catalogue of public documents," issued by the Superintendent of Documents, is recommended. It lists and describes all current prints from the Government press, giving bright readable notes on those of special interest. The subscription price is \$1.10 a year, but it is sent free to as many libraries as the edition will supply. The Librarian who regularly examines this catalogue, selects and obtains the publications of general interest and particularly those touching local needs is rendering a good service to the community. As a rule, Government publications may be had free, if the application is made while the supply lasts.

It is regrettable that our public documents appear in such unattractive form. The titles lack human interest, but abound in dull official verbiage. The names of the issuing department,

bureau and officials, and the serial designation obtrude themselves between the reader and the book title, which latter seems seldom chosen with a view of rousing the reader's interest. The long line of print across the page wearies the eye. There is dreary monotony in the colorless bindings of those issued in cloth, and too poor a quality of paper in the covers of the others. More tasteful get-up should be aimed for and probably could be had at no greater cost than the present. Because they become torn and ragged after very little usage accounts for the fact that in so many libraries the government publications are stored in cellars and attics. There are indications that thought is being given to these points and we may see Government reports put out in a form to compete in attractiveness with the issues from commercial publishing houses.

Under the now-existing printing law, the Superintendent of Documents is authorized to send copies of all public documents, as issued, to the Depository libraries. About 475 libraries in the United States are now receiving them. No adequate provision for selective distribution has yet been made, that is for the supply only of documents on specific subjects. In order to obtain these automatically arrangements must be made with the issuing Department or Bureau.

The small community seems to offer to the public librarian a more encouraging field of service in respect to government document literature than does the large city. At any rate it should be her duty to obtain the government publications which interest or apply specially to the community and also others of general interest and to post them in the library and advertise them in the local newspaper. The rural community should know about the Farmers bulletins, the Soil Survey reports and the Good Roads bulletins. The business man will find helpful suggestions in the very live Commerce reports and the teacher in the publications of the Bureau of Education. Every intelligent dweller on the ground wants to know something of what is below the surface and to him the publications of the Geological Survey tell many an interesting story.

The cataloging of documents is done in Washington, the librarian's labor being greatly lessened thereby. The printed cards are obtainable from the Library of Congress at a small cost, and should be used by librarians wherever possible. Closer co-operation between public librarians and the publishing and library officials in Washington is to be desired.