

George Seymour Godard (1865-1936)

Assistant Librarian, CSL, 1898-1900 Connecticut State Librarian, 1900-1936

Mark Jones, State Archivist

George Seymour Godard was born on June 17, 1865 in Granby to Harvey and Sabra Godard. Both sides of his family could trace their genealogies back to first settlers in Connecticut. The family had a record of public service. Moses Godard was a soldier in the Revolutionary War, and John Case was the first magistrate of Simsbury. Harvey Godard had served in the General Assembly.

George Godard graduated from Wilbraham Academy in Massachusetts and later, from Wesleyan University with a BA degree. He would remain an active alumnus of both schools. In the 1890's, he attended Northwestern University in Chicago. During the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, he served as a guide and gained an appreciation of the Beaux Arts style of architecture, which he later advocated for the design of the State Library and Supreme Court Building. In 1895 he received a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Yale University.

Godard tried teaching but decided that he was not suited for the profession. He next helped to found and organize the Frederick H. Cossitt Memorial Library in Granby. He liked the work and had a keen interest in Connecticut's history. In 1898, one hundred and one years ago, the ailing State Librarian Charles J. Hoadly advertised for an assistant, Godard applied and interviewed, and Hoadly hired him. The State Library was in the current State Capitol occupying what is now the Senate Chambers. The collection was not organized and was dispersed in out-of-the-way rooms, attic niches, and closets in the Capitol. Godard later related that



Hoadly discouraged him from listing or cataloguing the Library's holdings. Hoadly was more interested in editing and publishing documentary sources than in managing the collections. Hoadly died in 1900, and the State Library Committee appointed Godard as State Librarian, a post he would hold until his death in 1936.

Prior to his promotion, the State Library had functioned primarily as a small law library and limited manuscripts repository. With a vision of a library "of the people, by the people, and for the people," Godard changed the institution's mission to specialize as he wrote, along two "lines:" whatever pertains to the science of government, and whatever illustrates the history, character, resources and development of the State."

During his term as State Librarian, Go-

ard transformed the State Library. The planning and construction of the Connecticut State Library and Supreme Court Building, which opened in 1910, was his most important achievement. Within this structure, he established a legislative reference service of indexes of bills and a law library for the State Supreme Court. He also obtained legislative action making the State Library the official state archives and creating the State's first records manager, known as the Examiner of Public Records. He actively acquired public archives from the state and local levels and manuscripts from private organizations and people to document Connecticut's long history. He began the collection of artifacts which formed the basis for the current State Museum and in building a renowned Connecticut genealogical collection, sponsored two abstracting projects that produced unique statewide surname indexes, the Barbour Collection of Vital Records and the Hale Headstone and Newspaper Death Notice Collection. He provided leadership for the Library and was effective at publicizing its value throughout Connecticut.

When he died in 1936, newspapers across the state eulogized him. His body lay in state in Memorial Hall, and a service was held that was attended by elected state officers, judges, and heads of state agencies as well as their predecessors, state employees, and friends. So much in the public's mind had the idea of the Library and its head become merged that one obituary noted that people referred to it as "Mr. Godard's library."