

“Copyright Department” Headed by Register Opens Doors in 1897

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The first Register of Copyrights, Thorvald Solberg, took office on July 22, 1897. Five months earlier, President Grover Cleveland had signed a government appropriations bill creating a separate “copyright department” within the Library of Congress and establishing the position of Register.

By 1897, the Library of Congress had carried out copyright functions for 27 years. Ainsworth Rand Spofford, Librarian of Congress from 1865 to 1897, had persuaded Congress to enact a law in 1870 transferring “the entire copyright business” to the Library. The law required deposit of two copies of each work registered with the Library. Spofford wanted to build the Library’s collections through the deposits.

The law also mandated transfer of existing copyright records and deposits to the Library. Before 1870, U.S. district courts registered copyrights, and different government departments stored deposits, including the Secretary of State’s office, the Smithsonian Institution, the Patent Office, and the Library of Congress.

Spofford achieved his goal: the Library’s collections “easily ranked first among American libraries” by 1897, writes John Y. Cole in *Of Copyright, Men, and a National Library*, published in 1995. “Over 40 percent of its 840,000 volumes and at least 90 percent of the map, music, and graphic arts collections had been acquired through copyright deposit.”

But Spofford was overwhelmed. He told a congressional committee in 1896 that he devoted more than three-fourths of his time as Librarian to “copyright matters.”



Piles of copyright deposits await processing on the floor of the Thomas Jefferson Building, circa 1898.

“I am both Librarian of Congress and Register of Copyrights of the United States,” he testified, noting that 26 of the Library’s 42 staff members were “employed in the copyright work of the Library.”

The volume of copyright work was more than staff could handle. “In regard to the whole business of copyrights, which...has become so prodigious, I have had such inadequate help in performing the duties that are necessary that... arrears have occurred,” Spofford stated.

He recommended appointment of a Register of Copyrights at a salary of \$3,000 a year. “He ought to have a knowledge of the law and be experienced in executive business, and have quite a number of employees under him,” Spofford told Congress.

Less than a year later, Thorvald Solberg, a nationally known copyright authority who had worked at the Library from 1876 to 1889, embarked on a 33-year career as Register. The longest serving Register to date, he became known as a champion of authors’ rights, an advocate for copyright reform, and an authority on international copyright.

Eleven others have succeeded Solberg as Register. **Maria Pallante**, the current Register, was appointed in 2011. ©