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Florida's "State Library"

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FLORIDA'S "STATE LIBRARY."

The words are quoted, because, although in frequent use, they constitute a gross misnomer, the so-called "State Library" of Florida having always consisted of a great mass of printed books, pamphlets, maps, documents, etc., mixed and jumbled together in inextricable confusion, on shelves, on the floors, filed in dark corners and under stairways, in the damp basement of the State Capitol - a shame and a disgrace to the intelligence and public spirit of a civilized and long-suffering people.

That the earliest legislators of the State realized the vital necessity of carefully preserving, for the use of their posterity, the public records and historical treasures which, even in their day, had begun to accumulate, is abundantly manifested in the initial legislation of the infant state. As early as July 13, 1845, only a short time after the admission of the State and probably at the first legislative session, a statute was enacted providing that "it shall be the duty of the Secretary of State to cause all the books and maps belonging to the State to be collected together and disposed of as follows: One copy of each book or map to be placed in a room on the same story with the legislative rooms, in suitable cases, and properly arranged, and labeled and numbered, which collection shall be called The Legislative Library, and shall be for the use of the members of the General Assembly during the sessions thereof; and when there are two copies of any one book or map, one copy thereof shall be placed in the office of the Secretary of State, and arranged, labeled and numbered, as aforesaid, and which shall be called Executive Library." This law is yet in force, has never been repealed, and is a part of the present Revised Statutes of the State.

Ten years later, in 1855, another act was passed, also now in force, providing that the two libraries above created, shall be "under the care, management and superintendence of the Secretary of State, who is hereby declared ex-officio Librarian of the State of Florida ;" and the same statute commanded that "the said Librarian shall make a correct and full Catalogue of the books in the several offices under his charge," and authorized him to exchange duplicates for other books, etc., "with a view to the improvement and increase of the libraries aforesaid.."

Just what steps were taken in the olden time to comply with these requirements it might be difficult, and certainly would be immaterial, to ascertain. During the protracted administration of the late lamented Secretary of State, Dr. Jno. L. Crawford, a space in the upper corridor of the Capitol was partitioned off and furnished with shelving, and a large number of the (apparently) most valuable of the books, maps, etc., was deposited there; and many such occupied shelves are in the office of the Secretary, but so far as is known no Catalogue was ever prepared.

When the Capitol was remodeled and enlarged in 1902, the commissioners enjoyed a most favorable opportunity to provide suitable quarters for the "State Library," but they failed to do so, and the exigencies of the public business now demand the use of every room in the remodeled building, and complaint is heard that not enough room exists for the proper conduct of the State's business. No proper provision having been made for library accommodations, Secretary of State H. Clay Crawford caused shelving to be placed on either side of the basement halls, and in some of the basement rooms, and there quite a large number of books were placed, without arrangement or Catalogue, and subject to rapid deterioration by reason of dampness and dust accumulations, as well as by the ravages of moths and other insects, and of mice and rats. In their present location and condition they are of no practical use for any purpose, and indeed, without laborious investigation, no one desiring to ascertain what the collection really contains can do so. There is every reason to believe that among the conglomerate mass of printed matter might be found items of inestimable historical value.

The cause of the conditions which have thus been very inadequately described appears to have been a rather extraordinary and utterly reprehensible niggardliness on the part of Florida legislatures. The law authorizes the Secretary of State to appoint an assistant, but expressly forbids the payment of such assistant from the State Treasury and declares that he "shall look to the Secretary of State alone for his compensation" (Act of Dec. 17, 1861). The entire time of the Secretary is occupied in the performance of the routine duties of his position, and the services of two clerks and a stenographer are required to enable him to conduct the business of his

office. He has no time to devote to the arrangement, listing and preservation of the contents of the "State Library" and no provision whatever has ever been made by any legislature for the cost of employing a suitable and competent person to perform this duty. The compensation of the Secretary of State, although it was increased in 1897 from \$1,500 to \$2,000 per annum, is yet no more than enough to pay for the numerous, onerous, and constantly increasing duties imposed upon him, by law, and it would be, and would always have been, a gross hardship upon him to expect him to pay out of his private means the necessary cost of carrying out the provisions of law above quoted - to overhaul the entire mass of material, to re-arrange it in the cramped and inadequate space provided for it, to make complete and properly classified catalogues and to take such steps as might be found necessary for its proper care and due preservation.

The failure, for a period of more than sixty years, of Florida legislatures to make provision for the performance of the work above indicated appears the more inexplicable when the fact is considered that even now, with the mass of material increased by the accumulations of that long period, the actual expenditure necessary to accomplish the results contemplated in the law would not exceed the sum of \$3,000 per annum, and it might be done for less.