

Our Story



NLM

, the National Library of

Medicine, began quite humbly, as a few books in the office of the Surgeon General of the Army in the early 1800s. But in 1865, with the closing of the Army's temporary Civil War hospitals and the consolidation of their libraries, the Surgeon General's library got a windfall of medical books and journals. The Army summoned 27-year-old surgeon — and book lover — John Shaw Billings to take charge of the burgeoning collection.

Billings set out to build a world-class collection of medical materials and was relentless in pursuit of his goal. He wrote letters to physicians, editors, health and government officials, librarians, and society officers asking for donations, arrange exchanges or, as a last resort, buy books at a low price. He accosted State Department officials who traveled overseas and begged them to bring back foreign medical books and journals.

In fact, Billings was so dedicated in his quest that physician and author Oliver Wendell Holmes, recalling a visit by the librarian, noted, "Dr. Billings is a bibliophile of

the owner of a library, if he is ever let loose in it.”

Billings’ endeavors paid off. By 1870, the Surgeon General’s Library had become one of the largest medical libraries in the United States.

Billings’ efforts went far beyond collecting books. He set up a system of cataloging the library’s collection and is revered for creating the first comprehensive index of



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journal articles in the Library’s collection, the *Index Medicus*, in 1879. The latter was inspired by Billings’ own medical school experience — while writing his thesis on epilepsy, he was frustrated by the lack of a subject index to the medical literature.

Today, MEDLINE/PubMed, a free online resource, has replaced *Index Medicus*. This collection of over 16 million citations, dating back to the 1950’s, is the 21st century equivalent of Billings’ groundbreaking reference tool.

The Library has been housed in a number of different buildings through the years, including Ford’s Theatre just after Lincoln’s assassination. A 1956 act of Congress moved the Surgeon General’s Library to the Public Health Service and rechristened it the National Library of Medicine. Senators Lister Hill and John F. Kennedy were the driving forces behind the bill. Kennedy would see his vision realized in 1962, when, during his presidency, NLM opened its doors on the campus of the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, outside Washington, DC.



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
AND HUMAN SERVICES